

THE JAMES BOYS WEEKLY.

Containing Stories of Adventure.

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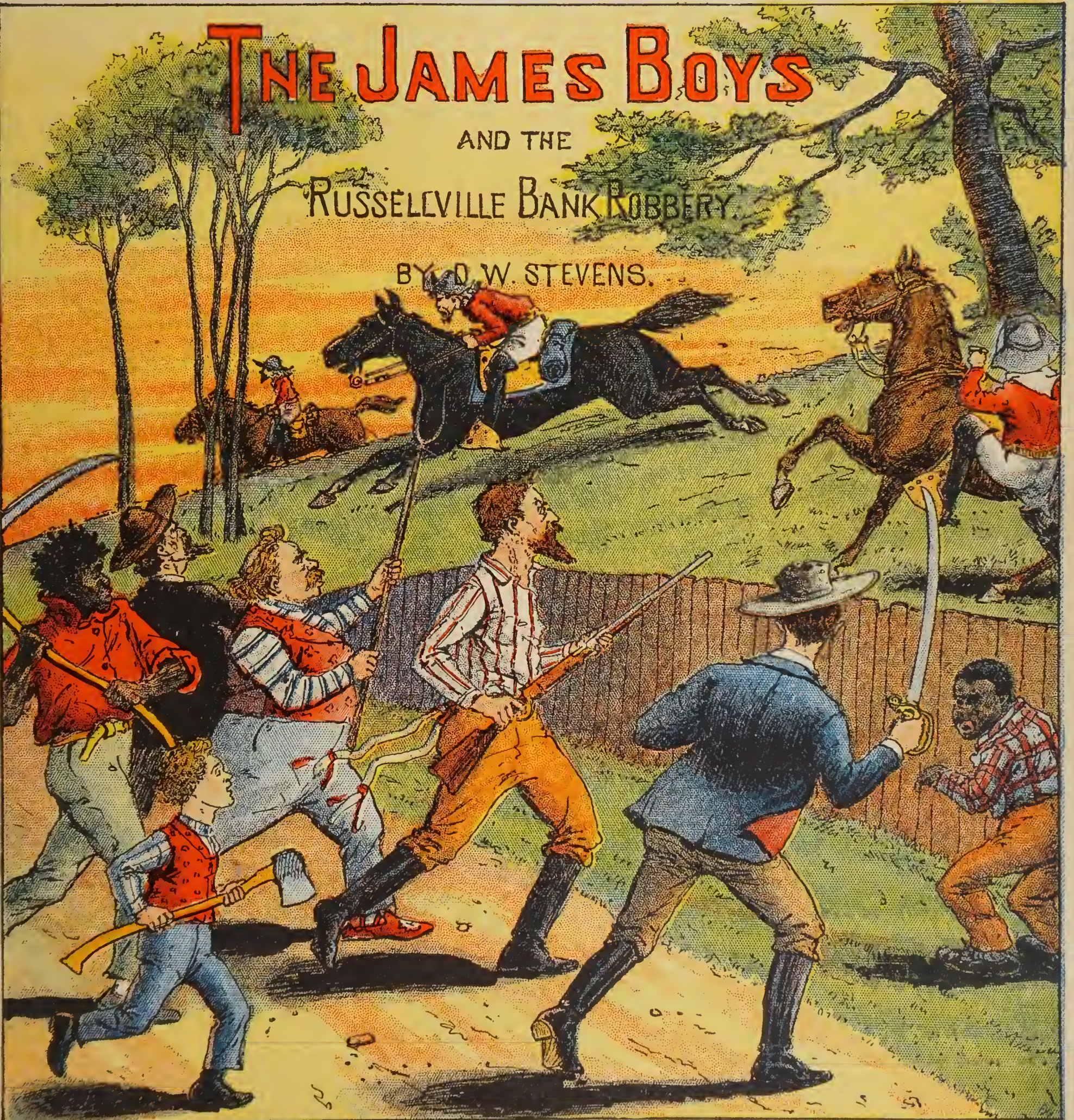
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THE JAMES BOYS

AND THE

RUSSELEVILLE BANK ROBBERY

BY D. W. STEVENS.



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NEW YORK, MARCH 20, 1903.

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The James Boys and the Russellville Bank Robbery

By D. W. STEVENS.

CHAPTER I.

HOW TO INQUIRE THE WAY IN MISSOURI.

It was in the spring of the year, and night.
Not a night when in the open pleasure might be found.
A steady drizzle was falling.
The moon and the stars were alike absent.
But in such weather no one would expect to see them.
Occasionally there was a flash of lightning, and in the distance, the sullen roar of thunder.

Apparently the storm had almost spent its force.
But at present it was exceedingly disagreeable, to use no stronger term.

Some men are, or must be, about in all weathers.
This night, it was many years ago, a man might have been seen riding along a rough, mountainous road.

He was in the region of the Little Blue, in Missouri.
At no time were there many people about in this locality.
The lateness of the hour, and the inclemency of the weather, had apparently combined to leave the whole neighborhood to this solitary horseman.

Mile after mile he traversed without meeting a human being.
And, inasmuch as he had not passed a dwelling house, the circumstance is not wonderful.

It was too dark to see what the horseman was like, but for the reader's information this much may be said:

He was wearing a broad brimmed sombrero and high riding boots.

His hair, wet with the storm, hung dark and long from under his sombrero.

His beard was full, and both hair and beard were very black.
There was a firm look on the man's face and occasionally from between his clenched teeth he hissed out a few words, which were the reverse of a benediction on the weather.

As he rode on, not able to see one yard before him, he left himself to the guidance of his horse, who seemed to experience no difficulty in finding his way.

"By heaven!" he cried, "what a night! I reckon I am pretty well soaked by now! Guess the boys are drinking their whiskey and having a laugh on me now."

But curses would not affect the weather.
Presently the horseman's fierce looks somewhat relaxed.
He could not get any wetter, and he proceeded to view the matter more philosophically.

His horse was not unduly distressing itself, but continued to cover the ground at a fast trot.

Now the horseman could hear ahead of him a loud, warning voice.

"That's not thunder," he muttered. "By gosh!" he exclaimed, after a moment's pause, "it's the river."

He knew he was right.
And the knowledge did not please him.
Whilst he was turning the matter over in his mind, he found he had arrived at the edge of the stream.

He discovered his anticipations were correct.

The storm had caused a flood.

The water rises rapidly in these parts.

Already the river was rushing down madly.

The stream had become a torrent.

"Great Scott! It is exactly as I thought," muttered the horseman, in angry tones; "it's as much as my life's worth to cross it now. Thunder! I must get to the road too."

Occasionally, when a flash of lightning came, he was able to judge how much the river had risen.

And the knowledge he obtained gave him no relief.

"I'll cross it!" he cried, at length.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said a voice quite close to him.

Amazed at this remark, the horseman turned his head.

As he did so a vivid gleam of lightning illuminated the scene, lighting up the intense gloom that prevailed.

Then, by this light, the horseman saw that not more than a few yards away, half-hidden by some trees, a man was visible.

He, too, was mounted.

Sitting like a statue on his horse, this man had neither been seen nor heard.

Now his face was turned toward the man whose movements we have been following.

In his hand he had a six-shooter, with which he covered the other horseman.

The first horseman was paralyzed with astonishment.

"See here, mister," said the man with the six-shooter, "I'm a stranger in these parts."

"Darned glad to hear it. If you were going to settle here, I'd move out! There's not room for both of us!"

The other man laughed.

"You see, it's like this," he explained. "I've heard a bit 'bout this district, and by gosh, I thought if I spoke you'd whip out your gun and fire, taking me for a bandit. So, mister, I determined to be first."

"Then you're not going to rob me?"

"No."

"Much 'bliged, only seeing, as I said before, I've nothing. Reckon I haven't much to be thankful for."

"Guess if you'd listen to me you'd save time. I'm not dyin' to stay out in this weather all night."

"What d'yer want?"

"I'm askin' you ther way."

"But as you don't tell me where you want to go, I'll have a trouble to direct you."

"You're right! Now, look here, mister, I want to get on the road leading to Harrisonville."

"D'yer want to go there?"

"I didn't say so. Put me on the road. That's all I ask."

"You'd like to find the road?"

"Yes."

"Look across the river then."

"Can't see in this darkness."

"You're right. If you could, you'd notice that the road was

out of sight, hidden by the water of this river. 'It's risin' a bit."

"Then I have to get to the other side?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Ah, now you are putting me in a hole. Ask something easier."

"It's a case of swimming my horse over?"

"You can try it."

"You were going to do it when I spoke."

"I'haps I was, but I've altered my mind now."

"Where are you going?"

"Gosh, mister, do you want to know all my business."

"Think I'll ride along with you."

"Can if you like. I'm going to keep by the bank of the river on this side."

"I'll follow you."

Then the two men rode away.

The latter still held his six-shooter in his hand, but he had no intention of using it.

The explanation he had given to the other man for stopping him in such a peremptory manner was quite correct.

And he apprehended no danger from his newly made acquaintance.

Nothing could have been rougher than the way in which the two horsemen were now traveling.

"If I'd known what sort of road this was I'd have crossed the stream."

"There's no one to stop you doing that now," laughed the leader, sarcastically. "Guess you or your horse might get over."

"That's true."

"Going to try it?"

"I'll think it over."

"Yes, it wants some thinking. I wouldn't get past the thinking stage if I were you."

Again in silence the two rode on.

The rear horseman appreciated the force of the satirical remarks that had fallen from the other man's lips.

So he abandoned all thought of trusting himself to the mercy of the rushing stream.

"Guess you think I'm playing a joke off on you, eh?" asked the leader.

"No."

"Well, I'm not. In two minutes we'll have pretty fair riding."

"Glad to hear it."

The leader was quite correct.

In less time than he had stated, once more the horsemen found themselves on a tolerably good road.

The rain had stopped.

"And now, mister," said the leader, "I reckon we'll part."

"Why?"

"I'm going to see a friend of mine close by. Reckon he'll give me some whiskey, and, by gosh! I want it."

"What's the matter with me going along? Think he'd treat me the same?"

"No harm in trying. This way."

Steadily the two horsemen continued to ride, until suddenly the leader halted.

Then, in the thickness of the night, it could be seen that the dim outlines of a small house rose in front of the two men.

CHAPTER 11.

IN PETE HAYES' HUT—SURPRISES ALL AROUND.

Not a light was to be seen.

If there was an inmate, he must have retired to rest.

The leader of the two horsemen rode right up to the door of the hut, for the building could be called by no other name.

Then he began to kick at the door vigorously.

And he followed up this noise by a whistle of a singular nature.

The two men could hear the man inside bustling about.

Very soon through the small window a light might be seen.

Then the door was unbarred.

"I've got a friend with me, Pete," exclaimed the horseman, who had been kicking.

"That don't matter! If he's with you et's enough for me! Come right in!"

"How about the horses? Shall we leave them here?"

"No. Better take 'em around to the back. That's a shed."

"Good!"

In a few moments the two horsemen found themselves in the presence of the man who had been addressed as Pete.

Then keenly they began to scrutinize each other.

For, although they had been together for some time, the darkness had effectually hidden the features of both men.

Pete had lighted a lamp.

By its dim rays the strangers were able to take stock of each other.

One man, the black bearded horseman, has already been described.

There is no need to add to what has previously been said about him, except to mention that he was a tall man with a big frame and large limbs.

The other man was not an attractive object.

He had reddish brown hair, which was long and unkempt.

When his hat was removed, the hair on top of his head stood upright. On the sides it lay down, for it had been wetted by the rain.

The man had a beard of a more defined shade of red.

His face was extremely ruddy, and it looked as if nature had been assisted by artificial means, such as the bottle, in producing this rubicund complexion.

He, too, like his companion, was fierce looking.

"By gosh! you ain't a beauty!" cried the other horseman, after surveying him.

"Guess we are in the same boat then," laughed the man who had been addressed. "You an' me'd go broke if we traveled on our faces."

The three men laughed loudly.

Vanity was not a characteristic of either, so the somewhat plain criticism, which had been passed, did not disturb them in the least.

The door had been closed.

Pete had stirred up the embers, which smoldered in an open fireplace.

Throwing on some dry wood, in a few minutes the fire blazed up, throwing out heat and light: both of which were grateful, the former especially so.

The travelers were wet to the skin.

"You're a bit slow to-night, Pete."

"Eh? How's that?"

"Don't know how. But, by gosh, I don't see any whiskey either!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Pete. "Et's that yer after!"

"You believe me?"

Pete made up for his previous delay.

In a moment he had placed a large jug of whiskey before his two visitors.

Pete's friend was the first to take a drink.

And he took a good one. In fact, if the liquid had been water, he could not have taken a longer draught.

Then he passed it to the man he had brought along with him to the hut.

The stranger grasped it eagerly, for he wanted something to warm himself.

He raised it to his lips.

As he did so the other man made a quick movement.

He stepped forward, six-shooter in hand.

He held the weapon close to the face of the man with the whiskey jug, which he was holding in both hands.

"Drink on, my friend," laughed the man with the pistol. "I don't want to spoil your fun, but when you've finished we'll have a little talk, if you don't mind."

The stranger was evidently astonished by what had taken place.

But much to the amazement of Pete and his friend he went on drinking as if nothing had happened, and entirely disregarded the fact that a six-shooter was at his head.

When he had taken as much of the liquor as he wished, he put the jug on the table.

"What in thunder does this mean?" cried the owner of the hut.

He had looked on what was taking place with amazement plainly depicted upon his face.

"Oh, he had some fun with me just now," laughed Pete's friend. "Now it's my turn."

Then, still keeping the third man covered with his six-shooter, rapidly he told Pete what had happened.

"An' what're you going to do about et?" asked Pete.

"Do? Why I'm going through him."

"Going through me, mister?" said the red headed man.

"That's my intention."

"It's wastin' time."

"Why?"

"'Cause I've got nuthin'."

The man with the pistol laughed.

"I'm a bit of a liar myself," he said. "Just now I told you I hadn't got a red. That wasn't quite true, for I had a red."

hundred dollars on me, an' I guess you're keepin' to the truth about as much as me."

"I'm tellin' nuthin' but the truth."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," returned the other, still laughing. "When I'm done with you I guess you ought to make some dollars in a dime museum. The man who only tells the truth 'd be a bit of a freak, I reckon. Pete!"

"Wall?"

"Take this cuss's guns away."

"Right."

Quickly the red headed man was disarmed.

So now the man who had been covering him lowered his six-shooter.

Evidently the work of going through a man's pockets was no new thing to him.

Rapidly he went on with his task.

As he did so his face got blacker, and he muttered angrily some words which his hearers could not distinguish.

He was annoyed at finding no money.

"Curse you!" he cried. "I believe you've spoken straight after all! Thunder, I wish you hadn't!"

"Told you I hadn't got any money."

"Hulloa! What's this?" exclaimed the searcher, suddenly.

Saying which he snatched at something white which slightly protruded from the inside pocket of the man's coat.

"A letter!" he cried, as he grasped it.

"Don't open it!" shouted the red headed man. "It's worth nothing to you. There's no money inside. Feel it if you don't believe me."

Not the least heed did the other man give to his protestations.

He sprang, with the letter in his hand, toward the lamp.

Then, holding it to the light, he gave a loud shout, expressive of surprise.

Pete turned toward him hastily.

"By gosh! yer noisy to-night."

"So'd yer be. Look!"

He extended his hand with the letter in it to the other man.

The latter, bending over it, read the superscription:

"Pete Hayes."

"Great Scott! Why, it's for me!" he gasped.

"Looks like it. Here, take it. I don't want to interfere with what doesn't belong to me."

"You never do," laughed the owner of the hut.

The red headed man thought it was about time to speak.

"Are you Pete Hayes?"

"Guess you're a stranger, or you wouldn't ask that!"

"Then this letter is likely 'nough fer you."

"Shouldn't wonder."

"Do you know a man named Bob Riley? He's called 'Kid' Riley."

"Thunder! why, Bob an' me traveled together."

"You don't say. This letter's from him, an' I reckon you'd better open it and read what he's got to tell you."

"D'you know him, mister?"

"Well, pretty much."

Pete Hayes—for that was the name of the occupant of the hut—did as he was requested.

"Shall I read et out?" he asked.

The red headed man seemed puzzled to know what to say.

He glanced from Pete Hayes to the other man.

"Oh, it won't matter if he hears et," said Pete Hayes. "He's 'squar'."

"Guess it would be a hard matter to keep me from knowing what the letter says," was the comment of the black bearded man, "for I should read it myself anyhow, Pete."

Pete Hayes without more ado read as follows:

Chicago, April —, 18—.

Dear Pete:—

I'd like to see you so's I could tell you to your face what I've got to say, but business won't let me get away from here.

The chap who will bring this to you is a great friend of mine. He's a white man, if there ever was one, and you know, Pete, when I say a thing like that it means a good deal."

Pete Hayes stopped.

"Bob's right thar," he remarked. "It's mighty few fellers he'll work with."

"Go on with the letter. You can talk after."

The reading was resumed:

"Guess I'd better tell you his name. It's George Scott, only call him Cherry, 'cause that's his name with the boys. Well, Cherry's got a big game on now. He wants to rob a train."

"Rob a train?" shouted the black bearded listener, in tones of thunder.

"Have you any objection?" asked the man referred to in the letter, whom we shall henceforth call Cherry.

"Oh, no. Not me! Go on with the letter, Pete."

"Very well, and don't interrupt any more."

"I'll sit quiet."

Again Pete Hayes continued his reading:

"Cherry's got on to a real soft thing this time. It's a matter of fifty thousand dollars, and he'll have it, too; you bet your life on that, Pete. He'll tell you all about it, and how it's going to be managed, but, of course, he's pretty much of a stranger in your part, and you can help him a good deal if you like. He'd make it worth your while, too."

"Do all you can for him and trust him thoroughly. What he says goes, and he's as straight as a line."

"If you come this way don't pass by the door of your old friend, "Kid."

"By gosh! that's a letter fer you," said Pete Hayes, when he had finished reading. "What do you make of et?"

"It's very pretty reading, Pete," said his friend. "I'll want to know more about it."

"You will?" exclaimed Cherry, in astonished tones.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to have a hand in it."

"Supposing I object?"

"You won't."

"Why?"

"Because you're in my power," said the tall, black bearded man, fixing his keen eyes fiercely on Cherry, "and I'm Jesse James, the bandit king of America."

Dead silence followed this astounding announcement.

CHAPTER III.

JESSE JAMES TAKES CHARGE OF CHERRY.

It was the turn of the red headed man to feel a second surprise.

To find himself in Pete Hayes' house was the first.

But Cherry did not change color.

Apparently it was impossible for him to do so.

He eyed Jesse James very keenly. It was only natural that he should do so.

For he saw before him probably the greatest desperado the world had probably ever known.

Well might he be styled the Bandit King of America.

Near and far his name was a household word, and everywhere it was associated with deeds of the most desperate courage, and in some cases of ferocity.

"You seem a bit rattled, mister," said Pete Hayes, breaking the silence.

"Guess I'm not," said Cherry. "Just taking stock, that's all."

"And what d'you make of it?"

"Don't want to quarrel with the gentleman," laughed Cherry. "That's all."

"Shows yer sense. Don't get him riled, that's all; jest as well stroke a grizzly as rub Jesse James the wrong way."

"That'll do, Pete," laughed the bandit king. "We don't want to spend the evening talking about me. Reckon our friend here knows the sort of cuss I am. Now to business."

"Business!" cried Pete.

"Why, sure. Don't we want to hear our red faced friend talk?"

"Gosh! I clean forgot that. Come along, mister, let's hear yer story."

"My story?" exclaimed the man addressed.

"Great Scott, you'll make me tired if you don't stop," said Jesse, savagely. "You're going to do something with a train, eh?"

"Hold et up," put in Pete.

"Try to," laughed the bandit king. "It's long odds it won't amount to more."

"They're not all as clever as you, Jesse."

"Shut up! Let Cherry have a say!"

"I'm dumb!"

"See here," said Cherry. "I mean to hold this train up, but, of course, I'll have help."

"Where from?"

"That's my business."

"Beg your pardon, friend Cherry," said Pete Hayes, "but if you'll look at that letter you brought me Bob Riley says you'll tell me everything."

"I'm willing to tell you, Pete," said the red bearded man, sullenly.

"Out with et, then, for Jesse'll have to hear et, an' don't you forget that."

"Suppose there's no help for it."

"Yer right. Thar isn't."

"Very well. I'd arranged with half a dozen fellers to lend a hand in this job."

"Where are they?"

"Some distance off, Jesse James, but it's easy for me to send for them. That was all arranged before hand."

"If it's all arranged, why in thunder did you come on?"

"Because I knew nuthin' about the country, and I want to pick out the best place for holding up the train."

"That's true. Go on with your story."

"There's not much more to say."

"Oh, but there is, though. You've only just begun," laughed the bandit king.

"Well, when I leave here I shall move about the country. Guess Pete'll put me on the right tack."

"Pete'll do what I tell him," said Jesse James, sharply, "so don't reckon on getting much of him. Now, mister, I've got a word or two to say."

"I'm listening."

"This is a big affair."

"I know that."

"Shall I tell you what I've decided?"

"Sure!"

"I'm going into this thing."

"Who with?"

"The boys."

"What! the James Boys?"

"You've hit it."

"And how about my friends? They must join, too."

"Don't want them. In fact, I won't have them. They'd only be in the way. We're quite enough without."

"But," urged Cherry, "they'd do no harm. It'd be safer."

"You don't catch on very quick, mister. There would be six more men in the 'divvy.' Now that won't suit me. Don't argue. It's no use. They're out of this, see?"

The bandit king's reasons were of a pecuniary nature. If six more men took part in the enterprise everybody's share would be materially lessened.

It is needless to say that Pete fully agreed with the bandit king on that point.

"D'ye want to freeze me out as well?" asked Cherry.

"I mean to act on the square," said the bandit king. "If this thing goes through, and we get the money, you shall have your share of it."

"You can't expect more'n that, mister," said Pete.

"Reckon I'll have to agree to anything," growled Cherry.

"Now, you're beginning to talk sense," remarked Jesse James. "There's a few things I want to talk about."

"Go on," said the red bearded man.

"You say there'll be fifty thousand dollars aboard of this train?"

"Yes."

"How d'ye know?"

"I do know. That's enough."

"May be for you, but I want to see into it a bit clearer."

"It'd take a long time for me to go over the whole story. It came to me through Bob Riley. I never troubled to ask him how he heard it, for I knew I could trust Bob. He wouldn't play me a trick."

"Yer can bet yer life on that," put in Pete Hayes, quickly.

Jesse James did not press the point any further.

An idea had occurred to him which seemed to render it unimportant for him to do so.

"What train is the stuff coming by?"

"Don't know the time yet."

"I mean on what road."

"The Chicago and Alton."

"Good! Is the money coming from Chicago?"

"Yes."

"Where's it going?"

"To Kansas City."

"So you don't know what train?"

"No."

"Nor the day?"

"No."

"You seem a bit in the dark, mister," said the bandit king, with a sneer. "You're sure you won't have to wait many years for this train?"

The red bearded man exhibited signs of anger.

"It's clear you don't believe me."

"I haven't said so."

"But, Jesse James, your tone does!"

"Now, Jesse James had not the slightest intention of quarreling seriously with the man from Chicago.

He was too necessary to him.

So he made some remarks which smoothed matters over considerably.

"Reckon you'll be able to find out when the money is dispatched."

"Sure."

"Soon, I suppose?" said the bandit king.

"Yes."

"How will Bob Riley communicate with you?"

"I've left him an address. He can send me a telegram there."

"Good! When do you expect one?"

"Can't say. May be a message to-morrow. Anyway, the money will be on the way to Kansas City within a week."

"Glad to hear it. We'll be busy. You are mad with me now," said the bandit king, "for spoiling your fun, but when you see what I can do for you, you'll be darned glad I had a hand in it."

"Boys!" said Pete.

"Well?"

"Reckon et's late."

"What of that?"

"Hadn't we better turn in?"

"You mean go to bed?"

"Yes."

"No bed for me to-night!" cried Jesse James.

"How's that?"

"I've got a long ride before me."

"Better rest."

"Can't. Me and this gentleman will have to go along."

"Me?" cried the red bearded man.

"Yes."

"But I'm comfortable enough here. There's nothing to take me away."

"Except that you're staying here doesn't fall in with my plans, and I'm running the show now," cried Jesse James, "and don't you forget it."

Cherry protested against being compelled to leave the hut.

But his protests were unavailing.

Jesse had already risen.

He was putting on his coat, which was now quite dry, having been hanging in front of the roaring fire which blazed in the room.

"Come on, Cherry," cried the bandit king. "Don't want to hurry you, but we must be off. Have a final drink, then we'll start."

The red bearded man saw that it was absolutely necessary for him to comply.

So he followed Jesse out of the hut to the shed at the back.

The two men mounted their horses and rode away at a fast pace.

If Cherry had any thought of escaping from the vigilant hold of the bandit king, he must very soon have become convinced of the futility of it.

For now it was quite light.

The storm had cleared away.

The moon was shining in the heavens. Every object was distinct.

Jesse was armed. He was not.

The bandit king, besides, was better mounted than he was.

So, if he had attempted to escape, Jesse would have been after him instantly, and would have compelled him to stop, under pain of being shot.

As the two men proceeded the country they were traversing became even more lonely.

It was now wild in the extreme.

They had long ago left the road, and were riding along a narrow path which wound in and out as it followed the direction in which the gulch ran.

This gulch was below them.

Then, in front of them, the man from Chicago saw what appeared to be an impassable forest, so thickly did the trees seem to have grown.

"Halt!" cried the bandit king. "I'll tell you in a moment what is to be done."

Instantly his lips gave out a sound which was like the cry of an owl.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MAN FROM CHICAGO INTRODUCED TO THE JAMES BOYS.

Cherry was completely puzzled.

—He could not conceive what the bandit king's action meant.

But to his astonishment, from a distance he heard a sound much like that which had proceeded from Jesse James.

"Come along," said the latter, as a smile appeared on his face, "it's all right."

"But we'll never be able to get through these trees."

"We'll have to walk, that'll be it," said the bandit king.

Both men dismounted.

Then they were able to proceed.

Jesse James compelled his friend, who was practically his prisoner, to keep in front.

The bandit king was close at his heels, giving him directions from time to time.

"Hands up!" cried a voice.

"It's all right, Ed!" shouted the bandit king.

"That you, Jesse?"

"You bet."

"But there are two of you."

"I've got a friend."

"Bring him along, then."

By this time Jesse James and the red bearded man had reached the spot where the man addressed as Ed was standing.

The party had reached a clearing in the wood.

So progress was much easier.

Afar off could be seen a large fire, the flames of which leaped up to the sky, brightening every object near at hand.

Round it could be seen the dark forms of a number of men.

Some of them were sitting on the ground warming themselves at the fire.

Others were leaning against the trees that grew near.

But they all turned around at sight of the new arrivals.

"It's Jesse!" shouted several of the party.

"Thunder! so it is."

The bandit king was assailed by all kinds of questions as soon as he walked up.

"One at a time, boys!" he cried. "I can't answer everybody."

"Who in thunder is this?" exclaimed Frank James, as he saw the red headed man.

Frank James was the bandit king's brother.

He stepped forward and gazed fiercely into the face of the stranger.

Several of the other men did the same.

"Yes, who is he, Jesse?" cried two or three.

Some of them spoke in angry tones.

For they had no wish to have a stranger introduced into their camp.

And it was their camp.

These men were the James Boys, and this place was their present headquarters.

Cherry looked around him intently.

His eyes wandered from one to another of the men who surrounded him.

And in all he saw a remarkable similarity.

Some were taller, some were stouter than the others.

But the expression on the face of each man was the same.

"Well, what do you think of them?" asked Jesse James, with a laugh, as he noticed his companion taking stock of the band.

"You ought to be proud of them, mister," was the red bearded man's diplomatic answer.

"So I am. But sit down, boys, we'll talk."

There was no need for Jesse James to make the remark twice.

The bandits were anxious to hear their leader's report.

He had been absent from the camp for some time.

And the presence with him of a stranger added to the desire to hear their leader's report.

So, whilst Jesse James talked, the others sat around the fire, smoked their pipes and awarded breathless attention to the speaker.

Seldom did they interrupt.

When the bandit king mentioned that fifty thousand dollars would be on the train, there was a shout, expressive of gratified surprise.

That was all.

The bandit king whispered to Bob Ford, who was sitting next to him.

The bandit king arose and walked over to where the red bearded man was sitting.

"Guess you'd better take a stroll with me," he said.

"I've no objection."

The two men walked away out of hearing of the circle around the campfire.

"Now hurry up, Frank!" cried Jesse James, angrily.

"Don't get riled, Jesse. Seems to me I'm only taking proper precautions."

Several of the bandits agreed with Frank James on this point.

"I want to know a bit about this man," said Frank James, "before he's admitted into our band."

"You believe in this man, Jesse?" asked Cole Younger.

"I believe his tale's correct."

"He may be an impostor."

"Not likely."

"I don't see that."

"There are too many circumstances in his favor. First of all, Pete Hayes is an old friend of Bob Riley, from whom the letter came."

"It may have been forged."

"Pete swears to the writing."

"That looks better."

"Besides, Pete's heard of this man called Cherry, and knows him to be a friend of the 'Kid's,' as Bob Riley is called."

"That settles me, Jesse."

"But, boys, you know I don't go into a thing without some thought," said the bandit king, "and I generally make some inquiry."

"That's true."

"And, by gosh, you'll find me the same now! By to-morrow I'll know how much truth there is in this tale."

"How?"

"Easy enough! You bet your life I'll work it!"

The bandits were now entirely satisfied.

It was now light.

The sun had risen.

The day was one of great beauty, as so often happens after a night of storm.

The change of weather, and the prospects of soon being at work again, both combined to put the bandits in good temper.

They were laughing loudly, and many of them were telling their comrades what they would do with their respective shares of the fifty thousand dollars.

"Now I must be off."

These words from the bandit king's lips, clearly spoken, cut short the mirth.

Dead silence followed.

All the bandits were surprised at what their leader had said.

"Yes, boys, I'm going," said Jesse James, as he arose from his seat on the ground.

"But where?" asked Frank James.

"I've got business to attend to. Cherry's coming with me."

The red bearded man started.

This was the first intimation he had had that he was to leave the camp.

He could not account for this proceeding of the bandit king.

"Get your horse!" cried Jesse James. "You've had enough breakfast for two men, and I'm in a hurry."

Cherry knew by this time that there was no arguing with Jesse James.

So he walked over to where his horse was tethered and led it back.

Then amid the trees the two men went.

Clear of the forest, the bandit king and his friend sprang the saddles.

At a gallop they started off.

They rode side by side.

For more than an hour the two men rode on.

They had passed several houses, and had seen several people, but no one had honored them with much notice.

Some distance ahead of them a few houses clustered together showed them that it was a small village.

"Guess we'll ride around," said the bandit king.

So the two men made a wide detour, striking the road considerably beyond the village.

About two miles from this village Jesse James drew rein, at the same time commanding his friend to halt.

The bandit king was surveying the landscape in a very keen manner.

"Yes, that's it," he muttered. "Now, to get to work."

With these words on his tongue he dismounted.

Cherry followed his example.

"Get into those bushes," said the bandit king.

"Very well."

The two men led their horses about three hundred yards away from the road.

Then the bandit king hitched up his steed, telling the red headed man that he had better do the same.

"We may be some little time here," said Jesse James, "so I advise you to sit down. I'm going to."

He suited his action to the words.

In his hand he had his six-shooter.

This he now placed on the grass by his side, ready for prompt use if necessary.

Then he took from his pocket some paper and a pencil. With wondering eyes Cherry watched him.

CHAPTER V.

PLOTTING TO HOLD UP THE TRAIN.

The bandit king was the first to speak.

"You're surprised."

"By gosh, yes."

"You don't think I'm a jay?"

"If I did I wouldn't say so."

The bandit king looked rather hard at the speaker, not quite understanding the last remark.

"Now, look here," said Jesse James, "I've heard all you've got to say, but you know it's easy enough for a trick to be played."

"That's so."

"So, to prevent anything of that sort I'm going to telegraph to your friend, Bob Riley, at Chicago."

"Do you know his address?"

"You bet—I got that from Pete."

"You don't put much trust in me."

"I trust no one."

"Have your own way."

"I mean to."

The bandit king was writing on a piece of paper which he had on his knee.

When he finished he looked up and said:

"Here's the message. What do you think of it?"

"Read it out."

"Very well."

Jesse James read as follows:

"Your friend Cherry arrived. Will help him as far as possible. Send message by telegraph confirming your letter to me, and also write me a letter to the same effect."

"Seems you'll get what you want if you send that," remarked Cherry.

"Yes, I think so. If Bob Riley knows nothing about you, by gosh," said Jesse James, giving the man a terrible look, "you'd better not have been born. That's all I've got to say."

"I don't look like a man who is scared, do I?"

"No."

"I'm not. Send as many telegrams as you like, and you'll find the result satisfactory."

"I hope so for both our sakes."

"What name are you going to put to the telegram?"

"Why, Pete Hayes, of course."

"You're right."

"Now we'll walk to the office."

"Is it near?"

"Yes. Come along. I'll do the talking. Don't you open your mouth or it'll be the worse for you."

"I don't want to speak."

Jesse James and his friend went to the telegraph office, which was near.

He handed the message to the operator.

"You expect a reply?"

"Yes."

"Will you come here for it?"

"Can't you send it?"

"Where?"

"To Pete Hayes' place."

"That's a good many miles away."

"I'm willing to pay. Take what you want."

Jesse James threw a ten dollar bill on the table.

"Very well," said the clerk. "It shall be attended to."

The bandit king and his friend went back to their horses.

Again they mounted them.

But they did not set their faces toward the camp of the bandits.

They paid Pete Hayes another visit.

There was a wait of some hours before the men.

They passed it in the best way they could.

First, they ate a hearty meal, for their ride had made them hungry.

Then they sat and drank Pete Hayes' whiskey, and smoked their pipes and talked.

Jesse James' patience was almost exhausted when he saw a man riding fast up the slope that led to the house.

"The messenger!" he gasped, rising from his seat and going to the door.

The anticipation of the bandit king was correct.

He took the telegram.

"Give him a drink, Pete," he cried, "while I see what it says."

Eagerly Jesse James tore open the envelope, half expecting to find that he had been made the victim of a fraud.

But the words of the answer to his message were quite satisfactory.

"Cherry friend of mine. What he says goes. Am writing. "Bob Riley."

"That looks all right," said the bandit king, as he tossed the message over to Pete.

The latter glanced over it.

"Couldn't be better. When Bob's letter comes we will know more."

"That's so. I'll be back again in two days for the letter."

The bandits knew the letter could not arrive for two days.

They spent this irksome period of waiting in their camp.

Of course, Cherry was with them all the time.

Any attempt on his part to escape was out of the question, even if such had been his desire.

He was constantly watched.

At length Jesse James was able to arrive back from another visit to Pete.

It was clear by the look on his face that the news was satisfactory.

"Had a letter?" shouted Wood Hite.

"Yes, here it is."

"Read it."

"Give me time, boys."

"Right."

The bandits crowded around their leader.

This is what the letter said:

"Chicago, Ill., April —, 18—.

"Dear Pete:—Got your telegram right enough and, of course, you got my reply. Glad Cherry's fallen in with you. Let him hear the contents of this letter, for it'll give him all he wants to know.

"It is all right about that fifty thousand dollars for Kansas City.

"The money is to be shipped right enough. It's going on a Chicago & Alton train, and it'll be due at Kansas City at three o'clock on Friday morning. Tell Cherry to act on this, for it's dead sure news. There's no mistake about it. Can tell him no more. He must make his own arrangements.

"Shall watch newspapers anxiously, you bet!

"Bob."

"There, boys! What do you make of it?" cried Jesse.

"Why, that it is a darned good thing that you fell in with our friend here," exclaimed Cole Younger, slapping Cherry on the back as he spoke.

"I believe you."

"Friday morning," said Jesse. "Why, that's to-morrow."

"You're right."

"I propose that we stop the train somewhere between Higginsville and Independence," said Cole Younger.

"Why there?"

"First, because it's pretty lonely."

"That's so."

"And secondly, because we can get away easily."

"I agree with Cole."

"So do I, Frank, if we can hit on a likely spot."

"How about Deadwood Gap?"

"By gosh! That's fine!" exclaimed Al Shepard.

"Yes," said Cole Younger. "There's a watchman kept at that bridge."

"We shan't find a better place."

"I'm willing, boys," said the bandit king. "Are you all of the same mind?"

"Yes, yes!" they shouted.

"Then Deadwood Gap's the place," said Jesse James. "That's fixed."

"We haven't a lot of time to spare," said the bandit king. "It's a long ride."

"Well, that's so."

"I think you'd better start, boys."

"We'll ride singly?"

"Of course, and meet at the Gap."

"How about Cherry?"

"He's going with me," said the bandit king.

"I'm off, Cherry, so you come along with me."

"You bet I will. I want to have a hand in this."

"Then hurry up."
The bandit king and the other man left the camp.
Shortly afterward the rest of the bandits proceeded to do the same.
The camp was deserted.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BANDITS ARRIVE AT DEADWOOD GAP.

Jesse James and his friend had not gone very far when the latter spoke.

"Is this the way to Deadwood Gap?" he asked.

"You bet it's not."

"Aren't we going there?"

"Not yet."

"How's that?"

"Because we are going to Pete's."

"That's out of the way, I reckon."

"Mister, don't try to teach me," said the bandit king. "I know what I'm doing. I'm going to the telegraph office first."

"Why?"

"To let Bob Riley know his letter was received."

"Is that necessary?"

"I think so; that's enough."

"Very well. I'm content."

In silence the two men rode on after this talk.

Until they reached the telegraph office to which they had previously paid a visit, nothing more was said.

Entering the office, the bandit king took a form and wrote a message on it, handed it to the operator, together with the charge for it.

He turned to leave the room.

In doing so he was somewhat in advance of the red bearded man.

Cherry had one hand behind his back.

In it was what looked like a small roll of paper.

This he placed on the desk in front of the operator, and then hurriedly overtook Jesse James as he was going out of the door.

Both men mounted their horses and galloped off.

The bandit king found he had more time than he had imagined.

So he did not unduly urge his horse forward, reflecting that the animal had a heavy task before it, and therefore it was unwise to distress it.

However, in good time they arrived once more at Pete's.

The latter did not exhibit any surprise at the visit.

In fact, he seemed as if he had been expecting them.

The two men dismounted.

They entered the hut.

The door was closed.

Significant looks passed between the bandit king and Pete.

Cherry could not quite understand what was going on.

He knew that it was necessary for the bandit king and himself to make a very short stay if they meant to arrive at the scene of the robbery by eleven o'clock.

Something had been on the mind of Cherry for some time.

It was the fact that he was still unarmed.

"Jesse James," he said.

"Well?"

"I've got something to say."

"Say on, only don't waste words. My time is short."

"I want a six-shooter."

"What for?"

"Great Scott! You don't think a man's going to take part in a train robbery without having something to shoot with."

"You won't need anything."

"How's that?"

"You're not going."

"Not going? Why, what has put that into your head?"

"Don't know what put it there," laughed the bandit king, "but it's there to stay."

"You mean to say I am not going to have a hand in the affair?"

Cherry became very much excited.

"By heaven, it's a darned shame!" he exclaimed. "It's my scheme, and if it hadn't been for me you wouldn't have heard of it."

"Can't help that."

The bandit king rose, as if to cut short any further discussion.

Cherry jumped up, as if to prevent Jesse James from leaving.

"Out of my way!" exclaimed Jesse James, fiercely, "or I may do you mischief!"

As the bandit king spoke he put his hand significantly upon his six-shooter.

Cherry instantly reflected that he was entirely unarmed.

"You've got the drop on me, curse you!" he hissed through his clenched teeth, with a face distorted by passion.

"Look after him, Pete," said the bandit king, carelessly, as he walked toward the door. "If he gives you any trouble, shoot him."

"Sure."

Jesse James had gone.

Already the echoes of his horse's hoofs were rapidly becoming fainter.

Cherry could hardly realize what had happened.

"I don't mind tellin' you," said the red bearded man, "that I'm stayin' here against my will. Can't it be arranged?"

"What?"

"My getting away."

"Not alive."

"The other way wouldn't suit me."

Cherry tried another tune.

"How much is it worth?"

"Worth? Don't understand," remarked Pete Hayes.

"Why, how much will you take to look the other way for a few minutes?"

"Can't be done."

Persuasion failed.

But the red bearded man had not given up the idea.

He talked to Pete Hayes about various matters.

But all the time he was busily engaged in thinking how he could effect his purpose.

He took his pipe from his pocket and filled it.

"Think I'll have a light from the fire!" he exclaimed.

"Help yourself."

To get to the fire it was necessary to pass to the other side of the small table where Pete Hayes was sitting.

The latter viewed the movements of his visitor with unconcern, for he was not advancing toward him.

The stranger was near the fire.

He stooped down, and lifting one of the burning brands from the hearth lit his pipe with it.

Then, as he rose up, which he did very suddenly, his shoulder managed to come violently in contact with the table.

Instantly it was overturned.

The six-shooter fell from it on to the floor.

Quick as lightning, Cherry sprang toward Pete Hayes.

The latter was in the act of stooping to grasp his six-shooter. Before he could do so, or rise from his semi-recumbent position, Cherry was upon him.

He seized Pete Hayes around the neck with both hands.

Then, exerting all his strength, he forced him on his back.

Pete Hayes was taken completely by surprise.

He tried to draw another pistol he had in his belt.

In this he failed.

Cherry did it for him.

"Now, we'll see whether I won't go," hissed the red bearded man, as he glared fiercely at his prostrate foe. "You're in my power, and curse you, I've a mind to shoot!"

However, he did not execute his threat.

Pete Hayes was quite powerless.

Both his six-shooters were in the possession of the enemy.

Cherry relaxed his hold on the man, and standing up, left him lying on the floor of the hut.

To find a piece of cord was but the work of a few moments.

There was plenty of it in the hut.

"I'm going to tie you up, mister," said Cherry. "Not that you can do me any more harm, but it's safer."

Quickly he passed the cord around the man's arms and legs and firmly secured him.

"No need to gag him," he said. "Let him shout as much as he likes. There is no one near to hear his cries."

Cherry walked to the door and unfastened it.

Turning around, he addressed a final remark to Pete Hayes.

"I'm going to have a try for the money," he said, "and I'll tell Jesse James when I see him that it was not your fault that I got away."

As the door closed behind the red bearded man, Pete Hayes hurled impotent curses and threats after him.

Cherry did not lose a moment in finding his horse and mounting it.

Then at full speed he set off for Deadwood Gap.

The bandits had all reached the scene of the intended robbery.

Jesse James was not there yet, though, but his comrades felt no anxiety on that score.

They knew that he would soon be on hand.

A better spot, so far as probable interference was concerned, could not well have been chosen.

It was a long way from the station.

Through the Gap a small stream ran.

The train crossed it over a wooden bridge.

At this bridge a watchman was always stationed, for there was sometimes danger in times of heavy flood, that the bridge might suffer damage.

To guard against any accident from such a cause, the watchman was always ready to show the danger signal and stop the train.

The night was chilly.

The bandits were posted under some high trees that grew near the bridge.

Unseen and unheard by the watchman, they had got to this place, having left their horses at some little distance away.

All of them were now masked. It was a precaution they invariably took to guard against detection.

They could see the watchman pacing to and fro to keep himself warm.

To seize him was a work of no difficulty.

Against such overwhelming odds he could make no struggle.

There was a slight rustling of the bushes.

It was not much, but their keen ears detected the sounds instantly.

At once they turned, standing with their pistols in their hands, ready to meet an unexpected foe.

"Are you there?" asked a voice, in a whisper.

"It's Jesse."

"Sure."

To their astonishment their leader advanced toward them alone.

"Where's the other?" asked Frank James, in a very quiet voice.

"Got rid of him."

"Not killed him, Jesse?"

"No fear. Never kill unless it is a necessity, is my motto, boys. No, he's all right. I left him up at Pete's."

"What? Didn't he want to come?"

"You bet he did, but I didn't want him. Reckon we can manage these fifty thousand dollars ourselves."

"You bet we can. There's not many flies on you, Jesse."

The bandits posted themselves on either side of the track.

The train would stop before it reached the bridge, so it was on the eastern side that they took up their position.

Jesse James was standing apart from the others.

It was his business to display the danger signal.

It was therefore necessary for him to be nearer the bridge than the others.

Moments of waiting are always irksome.

The bandits found the delay very trying.

"See! The train's coming!"

As the bandit king spoke, the bandits all saw the lights flashing in the distance.

The bandit king was ready.

He had the lantern in his hand. Now he raised it aloft, exhibiting the red glare of the danger signal to the approaching train.

The latter was going at great speed.

The bandits looked to see it check its progress.

But nothing of the kind happened.

At the same rate, like a whirlwind, the train swept by the bandits, past the bandit king, over the wooden bridge, right out of sight.

Bang! Bang!

Two shots were fired.

They came from the train.

One of them struck Jesse James on this pistol belt, but glancing aside from the metal, did no harm.

However he had a narrow escape.

Spellbound, the bandit king remained for an instant gazing after the retreating train.

He was so astounded at what had happened that he scarcely noticed the shots that were fired at him.

His comrades, too, were paralyzed with astonishment.

No one spoke.

Then, before a movement could be made, there was a loud noise.

Out on the track, in the direction from which the train had come, there appeared a large body of men.

"Surrender!" cried a loud voice.

At once the bandits knew that they had fallen into a trap.

"This way, boys!" shouted the bandit king, whose coolness never deserted him in the hour of danger.

Recovering from their surprise at finding their lives at stake, the bandits followed the advice of their leader and rushed desperately toward the bridge.

Their intention was to cross it.

Immediately, as if springing from the ground, appeared another

body of men, apparently as numerous as those who had shown themselves at the other part of the track.

The bandits were between two forces.

Jesse James was still going toward the bridge.

The sight of this new force stopped him for a moment.

Then, to his amazement, he saw at the head of this fresh force, the man whom he had left in Pete Hayes' hut.

Cherry was leading the enemy.

"Ha! Ha! Jesse James!" laughed the latter, triumphantly, "it's my turn now."

Mad with rage, the bandit king sprang forward.

He raised his six-shooter and fired.

Bang!

"Curse you!" he cried. "We may be beaten, but you shan't live to see it!"

Crack! Crack!

Bang! Bang!

A terrible fusilade rang out.

Past the bandits flew the bullets.

The desire was to capture the desperadoes alive.

Consequently the enemy fired high.

Otherwise, undoubtedly the bandits would have sustained severe loss.

Before the foe could fire again, Jesse James had taken advantage of the only chance that was left to him.

Without a moment's hesitation he sprang off the bridge into the stream below, calling on his comrades to follow.

This action was so sudden that the bullets that were fired went wide of the mark.

The bandits were sped around a sharp corner by the rushing tide.

If this had not happened they would still have run great danger of being shot, though now they presented a smaller mark to the enemy.

Seeing what had happened, Cherry, who was in command of one side of the bridge, led his men down to the edge of the stream.

Cherry found that the bandits had left the stream.

They had, the instant they turned the corner, clambered out on the bank.

Back to the bridge he hastened.

Rushing across with his men, he came up to the sheriff.

"Quick!" he cried, excitedly, "or they'll beat us yet."

"Why?"

"They're out of the river on this side. We must get through the bushes to them."

Fortune favored the bandits.

Through the trees they made their way.

Arrived at some distance down the stream, they crossed it again.

By so doing they managed to get to their horses without being observed.

"Separate and ride for your lives!" shouted Jesse James, as he sprang into the saddle.

"Where?"

"The place fixed on," was the enigmatic answer.

"Right."

Then, dispersing, the bandits rode away at their utmost speed from the scene of their defeat.

CHAPTER VII.

IN KENTUCKY.—JESSE JAMES AND BOB FORD VISIT COLUMBIA.

One fine morning, about a month after the events recorded, the bandits might have been found encamped in one of the mountainous districts of the Blue Grass State.

All of them were there.

The last of the band, Ed Kelly, had made his appearance on the previous day.

The weather was quite mild.

The bandits were lying around on the grass, smoking and chatting.

They did not fear intrusion.

For they were far away from any habitation, and no one was likely to pass near them.

"You read all about it, Jesse?" said Ed Kelly.

"Hang it, yes."

"By gosh! we never had a closer call."

"Thunder! it was well arranged."

"You bet it was," said Jesse James, gloomily, "but we couldn't do more than we did."

"We took every precaution."

"I call it great!" remarked Cole Younger.

"Great? Yes!" shouted the bandit king, savagely, "and our friend Cherry will suffer for it yet. I'll get my hands on him."

"By gosh! I don't want to see him again!" exclaimed Jim Cummins. "Once is enough."

"Who was he?" asked one of the band.

"Eh? Do you mean to say that you haven't read all about him?" said the bandit king, in an ill-tempered manner. "Why the papers have been full of business."

"Reading's not in my line, Jesse."

"Then I'll tell you about him. He was a fly cop."

"You bet I know that. What was his name, and where did he come from?"

"The papers call him Dan Martin."

"I know him!" cried the man who had wanted the information, "why, he's one of Pinkerton's best men."

As may be gathered from this talk, the newspapers, especially those published in the neighborhood, had devoted a large amount of their space to the attempted capture of the bandits.

If the project had been successful Dan Martin would have met with nothing but praise.

As it was he came in for a good deal of harsh criticism.

Amongst other things he was blamed for not having captured or killed Jesse James when he first met him.

But the detective had left Chicago fully intending to take the whole band, dead or alive, and he did not allow the accidental meeting with the bandit king to disturb his arrangements.

When he had accompanied Jesse James to the telegraph office on the second visit, he had handed a message to the operator without being seen by the bandit king.

It was this message which had brought the sheriff and his deputies to the scene of the robbery.

However, Dan Martin was not beaten yet.

One day the bandit king and Bob Ford went to Columbia.

This little town, or to speak more correctly, this village, was in Adair county.

It was a quiet little place and seldom gave evidence of exhibiting much life.

The two bandits knew it well.

They were acquainted with it in the old days when they were fighting under Quantrell's banner.

And knowing its characteristics, both men were surprised when they entered the village about noon to see so much bustle and activity.

The streets were full of people.

"Something up, Jesse," said Bob Ford, quietly, as they were riding side by side.

"Wonder what it is?"

"Political convention, I guess," replied Bob Ford.

"Maybe, but it's no good puzzling our brains about it, Bob. We'll put the horses up somewhere and have a look around."

"That's best."

Very soon the two bandits arrived at an inn where there was, as they knew, very good accommodation for horses.

The stable yard was crowded with carriages of all kinds, evidently belonging to the people who were seen on the street.

However, there was room for the bandits' horses, and after seeing them hitched up, and giving them some food, the two men walked into the inn.

Here they judged they would be able to discover the meaning of this unusual stir that was apparent.

The bandit king saw a bill announcing the sale of the late Colonel Randolph's stud of racers, trotting horses and road horses that would take place that afternoon at two o'clock.

Then he said to Bob Ford.

"It's an auction sale. Horses are to be sold."

"Oh, is it? Perhaps we'd better attend," laughed Bob Ford, "and buy a few."

"Guess some of the fast ones would be mighty useful."

"No doubt."

"And I don't see any reason why we should not get hold of a few."

"No reason that I know of, Jesse, except that we are suffering at present from a scarcity of money."

"What's money got to do with it?"

"Great Scott, Jesse, you're not going to ask the auctioneer to take your note?"

"Not much, only if I make up my mind to have any of these horses, I will."

"But it's impossible. You can't get hold of them with this crowd about."

"Look here, Bob," said Jesse James, sharply, "I know what I'm talking about."

"Very likely."

"And what's the matter with waiting on the road outside the village after dark. They'll nearly all leave the place. We can easily jump and capture some."

"By gosh, so we can. I never thought of that."

"Good thing you've got some one to think for you!" laughed Jesse James. "But come along, Bob. We'll get some dinner."

"That's what they all seem to be after."

"Yes. That's a fine old trick. They'll bid up better after they've fed and have filled up with some whiskey."

The two bandits went into the room where food was being served.

They had made up their minds that when dinner was over they would attend the auction.

The sale proceeded with great vigor.

The two bandits were there, watching the proceedings with considerable interest.

Many of the horses exhibited for sale met Jesse James' approval, and Bob Ford quite agreed with his leader's views that some of them ought to be taken possession of.

The bandit king left Bob Ford.

He strolled about, mingling with the crowd, occasionally having a word to say to some of the bystanders.

The majority of the latter were in the same position as himself.

They were not buyers, but had been attracted to the sale ring for want of having something better to do.

"Getting good prices," observed Jesse James, to a man who happened to be standing near him.

"Reckon so," was the answer. "Zeb Morgan generally manages to do that."

"Zeb Morgan?" said the bandit king. "Why, who's he?"

"What! Don't you know him?"

This in a tone of surprise.

"No; I'm a stranger in these parts."

"That accounts for it. Thought everybody knew old Zeb. Yes, he's having a good sale."

"It won't be over for some time, I imagine."

"He'll be lucky if he gets it over before dark."

"It certainly looks like that."

"Yes, and he's a long way to go."

"What? Doesn't he live here?"

"No."

"Where then?"

"Oh, on the way to Greensburgh. Old Zeb'll get back there to-night, though. He'll ride over in his carriage."

"Is that so?"

"Say!"

"Well?"

"D'you want to hev a bet?"

"What about?" asked the bandit king, surprised at this question.

"I'll tell you. I'll bet, mister, fifty dollars that the total for the sale this afternoon comes to twenty thousand dollars."

"Shouldn't wonder," laughed the bandit king, "but as I'm a stranger here and know nothing about the stock that's being sold, I won't have anything to say in the matter."

"Just as you like."

"Thank you, not to-day," said the bandit king, as he moved away.

Jesse James walked around amongst the crowd until he came to where Bob Ford was standing.

He touched him on the shoulder.

"Oh, it's you, is it?"

"You didn't imagine it was a policeman, did you?" laughed the bandit king.

"Well, no!"

"Come along, Bob, I want you."

The two men hastened to the inn.

As they anticipated, they found it absolutely deserted.

In the bar was one man only. That was the bartender.

And, judging from his remarks, he was annoyed at having to be there.

He served the two bandits with whiskey, and they sat at a table to drink.

"You don't take much interest in horses," said the bartender.

"Why?"

"You wouldn't be here if you did."

"Oh," said Jesse James, without a smile on his face, "we've bought all we want, and we're here to talk over a little business."

"That's different."

"Now, Jesse, what is it?" asked Bob Ford.

"When I left you just now, Bob, I had a talk with one of the visitors at the sale yard."

"Well?"

"He wanted to have a bet with me."

"What about?"

"He said that the takings at the sale to-day would come to \$20,000."

"What in thunder," cried Bob Ford, "does it matter to us what they amount to?"

"It matters a good deal. I'm coming to that. Now, the auctioneer's name is Zeb Morgan."

"If it was Nebuchadnezzar," said Bob Ford, angrily, "it could make no difference. Come to the point, Jesse, or I'll get mad."

The bandit king laughed.

"Now, Zeb Morgan does not live here."

Bob Ford made no comment, so Jesse James went on with his story.

"He lives over at Greensburgh."

"Go on."

Bob Ford was now all attention.

"He's going back there to-night," said the bandit king.

"Well?"

"He'll drive there for sure," exclaimed Jesse James, "and you bet your life he'll take the money back with him."

"By heaven!" cried Bob Ford, excitedly, "I see what you're getting at. You mean that we're to make an attempt at the money."

"That's just what I do mean. Now, let me hear what you think of it."

"I think we must have the money, Jesse."

"Well, we're going to make no mistake about that."

"How?"

"That's exactly what we've got to talk about," said the bandit king.

"I reckon it's easy."

"No doubt, if we can hit on a good plan."

"You say he's going to ride home?"

"Yes."

"Let's stop his carriage."

"I've thought of that, but I don't like it."

"Then there's another difficulty."

"What's that?"

"He won't be alone."

"He'll have his coachman with him, of course."

There was a silence of several minutes during which the bandits took occasion to help themselves to some more whiskey.

"Say!" cried Bob Ford, suddenly.

"Well?"

"I've got a plan."

"Out with it then. Hope it's a good one."

"You say he's got a coachman?"

"You bet he has."

"Very well. What's the matter with one of us acting as driver?"

"Thunder!" cried the bandit king, after a moment's pause. "I believe you've struck it."

"It's a good idea, Jesse."

"Yes, if it can be carried out. It's a plan I tried once, Bob, when you weren't with me."

"Try it again."

"If it can be done. But how do you intend to work the scheme?"

"Why, one of us will be in front. Then the other'll ride up and, of course, the carriage will stop."

"That's mighty fine. But how about the carriages and horsemen coming along behind? They'll be on the scene in no time, and then there'll be mischief."

"That's true."

"Still, your plan is a good one, Bob. This is how it can be carried out."

"Well?"

"Now, there's sure to be some horses turning off the main road!"

"There must be."

"So you see whichever of us that is driving will turn the carriage down into one of these lanes."

"But Zeb Morgan will notice the mistake."

"Sure. He'll shout out to know what's up."

"That'll spoil all."

"Not a bit, Bob. We shall have got all we want. We'll be away from the crowd and the affair'll be over before we have time to turn the carriage around again."

"Who's to drive, Jesse?"

"Can't say yet."

"Why not?"

"Must find out Zeb Morgan's coachman and see what he's like first."

"Now, what I want to ask you is, how will the man who's going to do the holding up know which lane to wait in?"

"He don't need."

"Why not?"

"Because he'll have to follow the carriage pretty close from here. Then, when it leaves this road, he must go after it."

"That settles everything. I think this will go through."

"I know it will."

"How shall we manage the coachman?"

"That's easy, Bob. We'll have to find him first, but I reckon we'll do that without much trouble. Then we must make him drunk."

"Good!"

"Come on! Let's go and find him."

"Very well."

The two bandits hurried away.

They went out into the stable yard, where there were a number of men, some of them lounging about, others attending to the horses.

It was evident from their appearance that they were mostly coachmen.

"Say," cried one of the coachmen, addressing another; "when d'you start?"

"Old Zeb told me about nine o'clock I was to be ready. Reckoned he'd have some supper after the sale before he left."

The bandits looked at each other.

They had found the man they wanted. The next thing to do was to isolate him from his companions.

Jesse James went at the matter boldly.

Leaving Bob Ford, he walked right over to where the man was standing.

"You're Zeb Morgan's coachman, I reckon."

"That's me."

"I'd like to do a stroke of business with you."

"Let's hear it."

"I'm taking a fancy to Mr. Morgan's team. Are they for sale?"

"You bet they're not."

"Sorry. Liked to have bought them."

"No; old Zeb wouldn't part with either."

"Can I have a look at them? I've only seen them when they were moving."

"Sure, this is the way."

The coachman led Jesse James into the barn, the door of which was open.

The stalls were crowded with horses of all kinds.

Zeb Morgan's horses were at the extreme end of the building.

For some time the two men discussed the various points of the two horses.

Then Jesse James proposed a drink, and the coachman with alacrity accepted the invitation.

So out into the yard the bandit king and his new friend went.

To Bob Ford's astonishment, they passed out into the street.

He wondered what was the meaning of this move, but he felt assured that Jesse James had good reason for what he did.

Then, in response to a signal from his leader, Bob Ford followed after the two men.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BANDIT KING HOLDS UP THE CARRIAGE.

Jesse James and the coachman entered a small house at the end of village.

Now Bob Ford realized why his leader had acted in this manner.

He recognized the fact that it would have been folly to have sat drinking in the inn where the horses were stabled, and to which all the visitors would return as soon as the sale was over.

"Jesse's smart, there's no doubt of that," mused Bob Ford. "Guess he's twisting that cuss round his finger."

A few minutes after the two men had entered the house—it was a small inn—Bob Ford did the same.

"Here you are, Bob," cried the bandit king, jumping up. "Wondered what had become of you."

"I lost sight of you for a time."

"Mister," said the bandit king, turning to the coachman, "you don't mind my friend joining us, do you?"

"Why, thunder, no! Sit down, mister, and have some corn juice."

The three men seemed to be having a very jolly time.

Jesse James told stories, and Bob Ford did the same.

The coachman took his part in the talk.

The time passed pleasantly, and the whiskey passed frequently.

So much so, that at the end of an hour or two the bandits

discovered that their new acquaintance was considerably the worse for what he had drank.

His condition was apparent, when he arose from his chair, and finding himself unable to stand, sank back in his seat again.

His head dropped on his chest.

Jesse James shook him.

"Wake up, mister, pull yourself together. You're all right."

But his actions gave the lie to the bandit king's statements.

His only reply was a confused murmur of unintelligible words.

"He's done for."

Jesse James held up his hand warningly to restrain Bob Ford's tongue.

He knew that drunken men, though apparently helpless, are yet able to hear and understand what is being said around them.

A quick decision must be come to. Already it was dark.

It was necessary to get back to the inn to harness the horses.

Jesse soon made up his mind.

He called the landlord.

"See here," said Jesse James, "our friend's a little bit under the weather."

"Gosh! It seems so."

"Now, we have to go, and it won't do to leave the poor fellow here. He might be robbed."

"You needn't leave him there."

"Why?"

"You can take him upstairs," said the landlord. "He'll sleep off the whiskey in a few hours if you'll let him lie down."

"Say, shake!" cried Jesse James, grasping the landlord's hand. "You're a Christian."

Bob Ford almost exploded with laughter.

The coachman was no lightweight. However, the two bandits managed to carry him to a small room over the bar.

They threw him on the bed.

The landlord had not followed them upstairs. He had merely indicated the room to them.

"There's no time to be lost, Bob."

"Not a minute."

"You'll have to do the trick. He's about your size and looks something like you."

"Darned good job he wasn't a coon. It would have been awkward then."

"Quick! Don't talk. Change your clothes."

Bob Ford lost not a moment in doing this.

The two bandits took the coachman's coat from him.

He made no resistance, for he was now fast asleep.

Soon the change was completed.

Bob Ford, with the coachman's hat and coat on, made a good likeness of the man to whom the garments rightfully belonged.

"You'll do, Bob. But keep in the dark as much as possible."

"You bet! Fortunately, Jess, there's no light about anywhere."

In a very short time the team was harnessed.

As Bob Ford was wondering in what way he should let Zeb Morgan know that he was ready, a voice rang out in this way:

"Zeb Morgan's waiting for his carriage."

"It'll be around at once."

Bob Ford sprang to the seat and, grasping the reins drove round to the front of the inn.

The auctioneer had his clerk with him.

The latter, Bob Ford noticed, carried a large grip.

Doubtless this contained the results of the day's sale.

Without any delay the two men entered the vehicle, taking the back seat.

Jesse James had been right in his anticipation as to the road being much frequented.

The departure of the auctioneer was the signal for the company to disperse.

Many of the visitors went off in their carriages, and a still larger number on horseback.

As a large part of them were going in the same direction as the auctioneer, the drive was, by no means, a lonely one.

Bob Ford's keen eyes had detected Jesse James amongst the horsemen who were following the carriage.

This is how matters stood, when suddenly about forty yards ahead of him Bob Ford noticed an opening in the road.

He slowed down the team preparatory to turning.

This action did not escape Jesse James's observation, and it directed his attention to the lane to which they were coming.

Instantly the bandit king decreased the gap between himself and the carriage.

"Hurry up, Sam," cried Zeb Morgan. "I want to get home."

But to his profound astonishment, instead of taking any notice of the remark that had been addressed to him by his employer, the coachman gave the horses a cut with the whip, and pulling

sharply with the reins, turned the carriage into the dark and narrow lane that led from the main road.

The auctioneer and his clerk were amazed.

What did this conduct mean?

Jesse James at a furious pace was riding up after the carriage.

The time for action had come.

There was a smile of triumph on his face, as with lips firmly set and pistol in hand, he made for the vehicle.

All at once the exact nature of affairs seemed to flash on the clerk.

"This is not our man!" he cried, pointing to the coachman.

"By gosh, no!"

Quick as lightning old Zeb Morgan drew a six-shooter he was carrying.

At the same instant the clerk, fearful that the money might be taken, hurled the grip out of the carriage into the darkness.

The clerk followed the money by leaping from the vehicle.

"Hands up! or I'll fire!" roared a deep bass voice.

It was the bandit king who spoke.

He was almost level with the carriage.

Bang!

A sharp report rang out.

But it was not Jesse James who had fired.

It was Zeb Morgan.

And Bob Ford had a very narrow escape.

The words that had passed between the two men he was driving had warned Bob Ford of the danger he was running.

Quick as lightning he had dropped the reins, and then he sprang off his seat.

Pistol in hand, the bandit king now rode up to the vehicle, which had come to a standstill.

The horses had stopped as soon as Bob Ford dropped the reins.

The bandit king thrust his six-shooter into the face of the auctioneer.

"If you want to live, keep quiet!" he said, in fierce tones.

"Drop that gun!"

The pistol fell from Zeb Morgan's hand.

"Now hand over the money."

"What money?"

"Curse you!" said Jesse, savagely, "don't try to play with me. I want that grip!"

"There's none here!"

"It's a lie!"

"Look for yourself."

The bandit king glanced into the vehicle. Certainly there was no grip there.

"Where in thunder is it?" shrieked Jesse, frantic with rage.

"Don't know, but expect my clerk could tell you if he was here. He left a moment ago, taking it with him."

Before Jesse James could make a reply he heard Bob Ford's voice:

"Look alive, Jesse! There's a crowd coming."

Then the bandit king heard the horsemen who had been riding behind him coming up at a fast pace.

Instantly Jesse James acted.

To wait a moment longer was to be either captured or in danger of his life.

He turned his horse and made a jump over some bushes at the side of the lane.

The bandit king had not given up the fight.

To most men what had happened would seem like total defeat.

But Jesse James never knew when he was beaten.

His quick brain had conceived a plan already, which was incredible in its boldness, and which might triumph, he felt, by force of its very audacity.

Jesse James had alighted in a field.

The turf was soft.

He found as he rode over the velvety grass that not a sound of his horse's hoofs was audible.

And the darkness prevented him from being seen.

As the horsemen rode one way, the bandit king went another.

He was going in the direction from whence he had come, that is, back to Columbia.

A crowd of horsemen galloped by.

Some little distance further went Jesse James.

Then he felt it was time to stop.

So he halted and took his horse out on the road.

Once more he altered his course.

This time he rode toward the lane, but he kept on the road.

When he arrived at the entrance to the lane he saw that a crowd had collected.

Two or three carriages had stopped.

A number of horsemen had done the same, and some of them had dismounted.

There was a confused babel of voices, as if every one was talking at once.

Now, the fact of this solitary horseman stopping, joining the throng and inquiring what had happened excited no comment.

It was only natural that he should do so.

Quite coolly Jesse James moved about.

"What's afoot, mister?" he asked a man.

"Seems some of those road agents have been trying on their tricks. Tried to rob old Zeb Morgan, I hear."

"You don't say! Where are the robbers?"

"Gone."

"Why don't the folks go after them?"

"No use now."

"Then what are they staying here for?"

"Looking for Zeb Morgan's money."

The bandit king took a keen interest in the search that was going on.

What was his surprise to see amongst the men who were groping about on the ground for the lost grip a face that he knew well.

It was that of Bob Ford.

"By heaven! Bob's got some grit in him," muttered the bandit king.

The clerk was amongst those who were searching for it.

Jesse James had seen this man before.

Then the bandit king began to watch Bob Ford's movements very attentively.

He noticed now that his comrade, unobserved by the others, was shadowing the clerk quite closely, although he scarcely moved.

"Wish we had a light," shouted one man.

"It can't be far."

"No, that's sure, for the carriage was a few yards back when I threw the grip out."

"I've got a candle," said one man.

"Light it."

"What's the good?" said another man.

"Anyway, give it a try."

"Very well."

The candle was lit.

It emitted a feeble flame, and this only for a few minutes.

The wind blew it out.

But it led to something.

This was the discovery of Bob Ford.

The clerk had seen him.

He gave a loud shout.

"Seize him! Seize him!" he cried.

"Who? Who?"

That man over there. He is the man who was driving the carriage. He is one of the gang who tried to rob us."

Bob Ford waited to hear no more.

He vanished in the darkness.

The bandit had plunged amid the bushes, and there he had easily evaded his pursuers.

A close watch was kept in case he returned.

But no one thought this was likely.

The search for the missing grip went on.

The clerk gave a loud shout.

"I have it!" he cried.

He was advancing toward the carriage with it.

Jesse James was in the way.

Reaching out, he grasped the grip.

But the clerk, unfortunately for Jesse James, had a hold upon it.

This he tightened.

The bandit king was furious.

"Curse you! Give it up!" he shouted.

"Help! Help!" roared the clerk.

By this time the scene had attracted attention.

A number of men had rushed to the spot.

Jesse James now realized that the game was up.

"That's the other scoundrel!" shouted Zeb Morgan.

Quick as lightning Jesse James dashed the spurs into his horse's sides.

Bang! Bang!

As the animal sprung forward the bandit king threw himself low down over the saddle to escape the bullets that were flying about.

"Wait a minute—it's me," shouted a voice.

"I'm coming up!"

"Bob Ford, by all that's wonderful!" cried the bandit king.

Instantly he halted so that his comrade might join him.

The two bandits spurred their horses and urged them forward

It was a race for life.

The only chance for the bandits was that they might lose the trail.

For the men behind would never give up the race.

It was too dark to see the bandits.

But as the sound made by their horses became more distinct, it was evident that they were losing the ground they had obtained.

This urged the pursuers on, and they redoubled their efforts.

"We shall have them yet," said one of the men.

"Think so?"

"Yes. Hark!"

"I hear water."

"I should think you did. There is a river at the end of this lane."

"They'll cross it."

"Very likely, but they'll lose ground, for they won't plunge in directly they arrive at the bank. They'll consider a bit."

It happened as this man had foreseen.

The two bandits heard the stream ahead of them as it ran noisily down.

But they imagined the road along which they were going would follow its course. They had no idea that the lane led only to the river.

The consequence was that they were startled on finding such to be the case.

"We must get over," said Jesse James.

"Is there no way along here?"

"Not unless your horse can climb perpendicular rocks," answered the bandit king in a savage tone. "Mine can't."

"Yes, we must cross."

The bandits rode their horses into the stream.

For some little time the animals were able to walk.

Then, getting into deeper water, the force of the current took them off their legs, and it became a case of swimming.

The position was serious.

The pursuers had come up.

They knew what was before them, so they had not waited an instant.

At once they plunged their horses into the water after the two bandits.

And now they were going even faster through the water than Jesse James and Bob Ford.

Fortunately for the two bandits, they were unable to shoot, because the whole of their attention was necessarily given to their struggling horses.

The two bandits gained the shore.

Up the slippery bank the horses climbed.

Jesse James stopped and faced his pursuers.

Bob Ford did the same.

Both bandits fired.

Bang! Bang!

What damage they did they could not tell owing to the darkness, but a shriek showed them that some one had been hit.

"They're not having all the fun," laughed the bandit king, as he and Bob Ford rode away.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BANDITS PURSUED—WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM.

The chase went on.

Even the wounded man refused to desist, though persuaded to do so by his friends.

"No, by heaven!" he cried fiercely, "I'll have blood for this."

At every step the ground became wilder.

The bandits were delighted, for they knew that they were leaving the settled part of the country, and that they would now have more chance to elude their pursuers.

Again, to their astonishment, they found themselves in a defile.

The moon had risen, and all objects were clearly visible.

Up the gorge went the bandits, riding in single file, for there was no other way to proceed, the path being so narrow.

The bandit king was in advance.

He gave a loud cry.

"What is it?"

"All up with us, I reckon."

"Why?"

"We're caught in a trap, Bob."

Evidently there had recently been a landslide.

For the pathway had gone.

And in its place was a yawning gulf, which seemed impossible to cross.

By this time Jesse James had dismounted.

At last he thought his career was likely to be ended.

To advance was impossible.

Behind, the pursuers could be heard as they came on toward the bandits.

"Jesse?"

"Yes."

"We must fight for it!"

"To the last!"

"What chances have we?"

"None."

"But we'll kill some of these men before we go under."

"By heaven, we will!"

"To give ourselves up is no good!"

"Good! It's death anyway."

"It is."

There was a fierce look in the eyes of the two bandits as they glanced at each other.

Little did they imagine that their attempt to capture the auctioneer's money would have such an ending.

But they expressed no surprise, and they exhibited no emotion, for they knew in all they did that the shadow of death was about them.

"By heaven, we can make a fight of it now!" cried Jesse James, loudly.

"How?"

"Quick, Bob, help me!" shouted the bandit king.

"In what way?"

"We can get this rock down. If we do, it'll bar the way, and behind it we can safely defy an army."

In a few seconds they had removed the obstruction that checked the stone's movement.

Then down it came with a run, filling up almost completely the narrow defile up which they had ridden.

The pursuers heard the sounds.

They saw the stone settle into position.

They could not see the bandits, but they knew that they were not far off, for there were their horses' heads visible above the huge stone.

The horsemen halted.

"What's to be done now?"

"I'll ride forward and speak to them."

"You can if you like, but it's a waste of time."

"No matter; I'm going."

The speaker shook his horse's bridle. The animal went slowly forward toward the bandits.

"You'd better come out of that!" he cried.

There was no answer.

"The game's up, my friends. I advise you to surrender."

Bang! Bang!

Each of the bandits fired.

This was the reply they gave him.

For they had reckoned that he was within range of their six-shooters.

One of the shots missed him altogether.

The other hit him on the shoulder.

He did not wait an instant. Back he went to his friends.

"Curse them!" he cried. "They'll be sorry for what they've done."

"I have my doubts of that," said one of the party; "they don't seem the kind of fellows who'd be sorry about anything."

"It won't be quite such an easy matter to kill them as it looked."

"Kill them? Reckon we can take them alive!"

"Alive or dead, it's all the same to me. They must not escape."

"It'll be light in two hours."

"What about that?"

"I reckon we'd better wait till then."

Eventually it was decided to undertake no operations against the two bandits until daylight came.

In this decision they all agreed.

The bandits meanwhile were wondering what the inaction of the enemy meant.

For they had quite expected that notwithstanding the difficulties of their task that the pursuers would attempt their capture.

But time went by, and still nothing was done.

"What's it mean?"

"Can't tell, Bob."

Anxiously, the two bandits waited for the dawn.

Slowly it came.

By the first streaks of day they could see their pursuers camped some distance down the narrow defile and out of range of the bandit's pistols.

Keenly the bandits watched these men.

Evidently something was afoot.

Then the bandits observed that some of the men were moving off.

"If they don't leave many behind," exclaimed Bob Ford, "we may be able to break through."

But this hope was rudely dashed aside when it was seen that there were not less than ten men in the defile, all of them armed, and all ready to resist any attempt the bandits might make to escape.

"That door is closed!" exclaimed Jesse James.

"Jesse!"

Bob Ford made the remark.

He had been paying no attention to the bandit king's words.

"Well?"

"Look down here."

"I'm looking."

"What d'you see?"

"A mighty big hole."

"That's so, but d'you notice the sides of it?"

"There's nothing particular about them."

"Except that they slope outwardly a bit, and that they seem to be soft."

"Well?"

"See that ledge below?"

"Yes."

"If we could reach that we could get away."

"But we can't."

"I think we may."

"How?"

"By cutting holes in the sides of the pit with our knives as we descend, and then hang on to these holes by our hands."

The bandit king happened to look up.

Then he saw a startling sight.

Some of the pursuers were making their way up the ridge of rocks to the top of the bluff.

Knowing what would happen when once they reached the top, this was an appalling spectacle.

"By heaven, Bob!" cried the bandit king. "They're getting up there now! Look!"

Both the bandits gazed in mute astonishment at what was passing above.

But it roused them to action.

The danger was more pressing.

"We'll try your plan," said Jesse James, with a determined air.

"Right!"

Both the men set to work.

It was not only tedious, but dangerous.

It was necessary to hang on by one hand whilst working with the other.

So there was the constant possibility of losing hold and falling into the abyss.

True, the feet were able to relieve some of the strain, but after all this did not amount to much.

The bandits could not conceal from themselves the danger they were in.

But, going on with their work slowly and resolutely, progress was made.

Several times they looked up with anxious eyes to see whether the enemy was in sight.

Bob Ford uttered a cry.

"There they are!" he shouted.

Jesse James looked up and saw his foes standing on the brink of the precipice.

"We must jump, Bob!"

"We shall be killed if we do."

"And if we don't? Listen!"

"My God! People coming!"

"It's the men running up the path."

To stay meant sure death.

The ledge the bandits were struggling to reach lay some distance below them yet.

But there alone could safety be obtained.

Instantaneously both the bandits loosened their hold and dropped. They both alighted on the ledge of rock.

But it was with the utmost difficulty that they were able to keep themselves from being overbalanced and falling into the abyss.

Recovering quickly, along the rocky ledge they hastened.

As they did so, down came a huge mass of rock from above.

In its descent it crashed into several pieces, and dashed past them on its way to the bottom of the pit.

Not only did it do them no injury, but it seemed as if its coming saved them from death.

The men in the defile, having received the message from their comrades, knew what it meant.

Without an instant's loss of time they now rushed up the pathway.

The bandits were then about to descend on to the ledge of rock.

They would have been entirely at the mercy of the men above.

But the latter were afraid to advance when they saw the huge rock suspended above their heads, and evidently ready to fall at any moment.

This hesitation saved the bandits.

Before the men had passed the stone which barred their way, Jesse James and Bob Ford were out of sight.

The two bandits were crawling along rapidly in what was a fissure in the earth.

Jesse James cautiously raised his head to have a look around, knowing that he would be near the surface.

He was so surprised by what he saw that he almost betrayed himself by a shout.

His head was instantly withdrawn.

"We can get away, Bob."

"How?"

"Easy. All those cusses are up above looking for us."

"Well?"

"A few yards away are their horses."

"You don't say."

"It's so."

"That's great."

"We'll crawl a few yards further, and then we'll dash out, seize two of their horses and ride away."

"Right."

This programme was carried out.

The bandits rushed toward the horses which had been left standing in the defile.

They were in the saddle before they were seen.

Then, waving their arms defiantly, they galloped off.

Their unexpected action obtained a long lead for them.

Eventually they threw their pursuers off the trail, and reached the camp in the mountains in safety.

They had never expected to do so.

Most of the bandits were on hand.

Cole Younger and Frank James were absent.

It may naturally be supposed that the bandits gathered around their two comrades, eager to hear what had happened to them.

For it was not necessary for Jesse James or Bob Ford to speak.

Their looks showed that they had passed through some stirring times.

On the following day Cole Younger and Frank James returned to camp.

"Heard about you, Jesse," said Cole Younger.

"Oh!"

"Yes, you made things hum in Columbia."

"How'd you get on to it?"

"Great Scott! Why, it's in all the papers."

"You don't say!"

"We read it this morning, and in a moment Frank and me knew who it was."

"Where've you been?"

"Oh, all around, Jesse, but we finished up at a place called Hartford."

"I know it. It's small."

"Yes."

"Well, let us know what you did there."

"Well, boys," continued Frank James, "there is a big store in the town kept by a man named Moses Taylor."

"I've heard of him."

"He's rich, so people say."

"Hurry up!"

"I went into the store this morning to buy something."

"That's not very strange."

"No, but it was through that that I heard what I did."

"Well?"

"A clerk was attending to me. Quite near two men were talking. One of them was Moses Taylor, the proprietor."

"How d'you know?"

"I heard the people address him."

"Now, the fellow who was talking to him I reckon was a drummer."

"What were they talking about?"

"Business. Old man Taylor told the drummer that he'd never had such a good year since he'd been in business. The old man said he reckoned he made money because he always manages to buy cheap."

"This isn't very interesting."

"I'm coming to the point."

"Wish you would, Frank."

"He said then that in order to snap up bargain he always keeps a few thousand dollars on hand. When he heard of something good he hurried off and bought it, paying cash and getting things cheap."

"B'gosh, Frank, one would think," exclaimed the bandit king, savagely, "that you were going to open a dry goods store by the way you talk. Now, the business I'm in at present's good enough for me."

"Do you mean to say, Jesse, you can't see the importance of what I've said?"

"Can't say I do, Frank."

"It's clear enough, anyway. I said that Moses Taylor," continued Frank James, "always kept several thousand dollars on hand."

"Ah! Now I see your game. I overlooked that part of the story."

"Now, why shouldn't we have those dollars, Jesse?"

"There's no reason in the world."

The bandit king sat silent for some little time.

At length he spoke.

"Boys," he said, "I've had a bit of a think, and I'm dead sure that Frank's hit on something that looks like business."

"I think so."

"So do I."

It was the general opinion that the matter should be further pursued.

"Now, it's darned clear that we can't get to work till we know some more," said Jesse James.

"That's quite true."

"Somebody must go and make inquiries."

"Who?"

"Hadn't you better look after the affair yourself, Jesse?" asked Clell Miller.

"I would in a minute, only, by gosh, I don't think it's quite safe so soon after the Columbia business."

"Guess you're right there."

"Let Frank."

"I'd rather not. Seems to me, boys, that neither me nor Cole had better show up again in this town at present. Why not Jim Cummins? It's only a case of making inquiries, and Jim's had plenty of experience in that sort of work."

"Tell you what, boys, Jim shall go into the town," said the bandit king, "and I'll be not far off. I'll be where he can get to me."

This arrangement, being satisfactory, was determined upon.

CHAPTER X.

JIM CUMMINS GOES TO COLUMBIA.

The bandit king knew Hartford well.

So did Jim Cummins.

They had both visited the place when they were with Quantrell's guerillas.

Jesse had no doubt that he would be able to find some hiding place on the outskirts of the town.

If not a house or a barn, then some wood would serve his purpose for the short time he would require it.

The bandit king did not disguise himself so far as his face was concerned, but he changed his attire.

But inasmuch as he did not think that he had attracted a great deal of attention at Columbia, he was not very anxious.

At the same time, desiring to be on the safe side, he preferred that Jim Cummins should do the talking, if any had to be done, with the residents of the town.

The two men left the camp together.

Jesse found, as he had expected, a very convenient hiding place.

It was an old wooden shanty, a little better than a ruin, within a mile of Hartford, and standing some distance off the road amid some thickly grown trees.

By the time the bandits had hit upon this spot it was too late.

"Guess I'll take a nap. We're not likely to be interfered with."

"Sleep as long as you like, Jim. I'm not tired," said the bandit king. "I'll keep on guard."

In a few minutes Jim Cummins was fast asleep.

The next morning he was awake early.

After a few final words with his leader he left the old hut.

Jim Cummins had in his aspect no trace of the bandit or desperado.

He was plainly dressed in a dark suit of clothes and looked like a respectable farmer or business man.

He might have been taken for either.

As he walked through the town he attracted little attention from the people who were about.

They saw he was a stranger, but there was nothing extraordinary about this.

Jim Cummins first of all took a good look at the outside of the store kept by Moses Taylor.

It was larger than he had expected.

People are apt to be deceived at the volume of business that is transacted in these small towns.

The store of Moses Taylor did not only supply Hartford, but also the surrounding country for a radius of many miles.

From his survey of the place Jim Cummins did not learn much that promised to be of value at the time.

Most of the morning the bandit spent at the Southern Hotel, in the town.

There he had registered as George W. Reed.

Jim Cummins had done this so that it might fit in with the line he was going to adopt.

Easily he obtained a description of Moses Taylor, the proprietor of the store.

Having acquired this information, the bandit left the hotel and took up a position near the store.

Here, without attracting attention, he was able to see everybody that passed in or out.

Very soon the proprietor himself appeared.

There could be no mistake about that.

For he answered to the description that the bandit had obtained of him.

He was a short, stout man, about fifty years old, with a florid complexion, smooth face and a bald head.

This latter fact was ascertained by his lifting his hat to wipe his brow.

Down the street went Mr. Taylor.

This was exactly what Jim Cummins wanted.

He felt satisfied that the man would not return for some little time.

So he hurried over to the store and entered it.

A young man came up and asked him what his business was.

"I want to see Mr. Taylor," said Jim Cummins.

"He's just stepped out."

"Back soon?"

"Not for an hour, I know."

"Ah, well, it's no matter."

"P'haps I can do as well."

"If you'll take this card," said Jim Cummins, "you'll see the nature of my business."

The clerk took it and read on it: "George W. Reed," representing a dry goods firm in New York.

The firm was a genuine one, but there was no such one as "George W. Reed" in their employ.

Jim Cummins had used this card in Missouri some time before, and finding it in the pocket of the coat he was now wearing, the idea came into his head that he might find it useful now.

"I'm in an awkward fix," said the bandit. "My samples haven't come on. Got mislaid or lost somehow. It means a loss of money to me, and I've lodged a claim."

"Reckon they'll soon turn up."

"Hope so. Having nothing to do, I thought I would like to see Mr. Taylor. This is my first visit here, and I'll be glad to make his acquaintance."

"Of course you'd rather see him," said the clerk. "That's only natural. But I may tell you that I do practically all the business here now. Soon I'll have it myself, for Mr. Taylor's made a nice sum of money and talks of retiring."

"I'm pleased to hear it. I'd be glad if you'd come around to the hotel and have some dinner with me to-day. Say one o'clock."

"Well, that's very kind of you."

"Then you'll come?"

"Yes."

"I'll be expecting you."

Jim Cummins walked away, satisfied with what he had done. Everything had gone well.

The loss of the samples he considered a clever stroke of policy.

It saved him from entering into the sale of goods of which he was entirely ignorant.

The intricacies of the business would have led to exposure.

Now, the fact that the manager of the store should dine with him was most natural.

Commercial travelers, in order to do business, are in the habit of extending such courtesies to the men who buy for stores.

And consequently the manager experienced no surprise on receiving such an invitation.

He looked forward to a pleasant time.

For visitors from New York and the great cities of the North

brought news with them of the busy world and its doings, which was always acceptable to residents in these quiet little towns like Hartford.

The manager was on time.

At one o'clock precisely, Jim Cummins and his guest sat down to a very excellent repast, which the bandit had ordered.

The meal was a merry one.

The laughter proceeding from the table where the two men sat, attracted the attention of a gentleman who had entered the room a few minutes before, and who was now standing at a window, looking out on the street, apparently having nothing else to do.

He was a man whose appearance was not calculated to attract attention.

He was quite an ordinary looking man.

No doubt he was a business man, probably a commercial traveler.

He was dressed in a black coat and vest and dark trousers, had iron-gray hair and beard and mustache of the same color, and he wore spectacles.

Shortly after he came into the room this stranger walked over to the table near that at which sat Jim Cummins and his friend.

Ring a bell, he, too, ordered a dinner.

Then, taking up a newspaper, he occupied himself in reading its contents until he was served.

The stranger, as he ate his dinner, could not help hearing the talk that went on at the next table.

For the conversation was not carried on in quiet tones.

"Say," said the manager.

"Well?"

"You fellows have lively times I reckon."

"You bet, we enjoy ourselves on the road," said Jim Cummins; "but we don't let that interfere with business."

"Some do."

"I don't," said the bandit; "if I had I shouldn't be where I am to-day. I guess the house I travel for is all right."

"There's not a better house in the trade," said the guest, "than that of J. B. Gordon & Sons, of New York."

"No; and they won't keep men who won't send in plenty of good business."

"I know that's so."

"This is my first visit South."

"I know you've never been our way before."

"No. I've done the northern and eastern districts."

"You'll like this better."

"If everybody I meet's like you I will," said Jim Cummins, smilingly.

"Come around about four o'clock," said the guest. "You'll find Mr. Taylor at home, and he'll be able to talk to you."

"I will."

"Sorry I can't stay now."

"Oh, business is business! I won't try to keep you, but, of course, I shall see you again."

"Sure!"

Jim Cummins sat at the table for some little time after his visitor had gone.

Then he left the room and walked out to the bar, where he sat and smoked.

The gray haired stranger had been regarding him very intently, and he had listened to every word of the talk that had taken place.

"Strange!" he muttered. "I seem to have heard that voice before, but for the life of me I can't locate it."

Again the stranger stood at the window.

But he was not looking out. He was thinking.

It seemed to him that the man who had just left the room did not look entirely like a business man.

"He may be, of course," he mused, "but I don't think so."

The stranger also strolled out to the bar.

But he did not enter it.

He stood just outside the open door.

Within he could hear bursts of laughter, and the voice of the drummer that had attracted his attention.

Now, more than ever he suspected the man.

For the quick and experienced ears of the stranger knew that the drummer's accent and language was that of a man whose life had been lived in the West.

The man was now talking in his natural tones.

"I'll keep my eye on him," mused the stranger. "There's some game on. Wonder what it is? Wish I knew where I've met that fellow, for I'm dead sure I've seen him."

Going back to the bar, he discovered that the drummer had gone.

But he was not far off.

Slowly was he walking down the street.

"Reckon he's going to keep that appointment he spoke of with

Mr. Taylor," said the stranger to himself. "I may as well see, though."

With this thought in his head he followed the drummer, or rather Jim Cummins, at a distance, and saw him turn into Moses Taylor's store.

"I can do nothing more," muttered the man.

So he walked back to the hotel.

Time passed on, but the stranger could not get this man and his movements out of his head.

At length he came to a resolution.

An idea occurred to him, and he resolved to carry it out.

He sat down and wrote the following message:

"To J. B. Gordon & Sons,

"— Broadway, New York.

"Man here named George W. Reed. Claims to represent you. Is this so? Reply to Southern Hotel, Hartford, Ky.

"Henshaw."

"Well," muttered the stranger, whom we may as well call Mr. Henshaw, seeing that this is how he signed his name to the message. "I think that is about what I want."

Mr. Henshaw had obtained the drummer's full name by looking at the hotel register.

He had heard the guest at the table address him as Mr. Reed.

Satisfied with what he had written, Mr. Henshaw at once proceeded to the telegraph office and despatched the message.

Whilst waiting for a reply he strolled about the town.

Meanwhile let us see what is happening to Jim Cummins.

Apparently everything was prospering most smoothly with the bandit.

In a room of the house which adjoined the store of Moses Taylor sat two men with cigars in their mouths and a bottle of whiskey on the table.

One of them was Jim Cummins, the other was Moses Taylor.

The bandit had apparently established himself in the good graces of the proprietor as easily as he had with the manager.

Evidently both were in good humor.

"You didn't think, Mr. Reed, that I did much business from the look of the store to-day?"

"Well, that's a fact."

"But see it to-morrow."

"Why to-morrow?"

"Because that's market day here. The store'll be crowded and then the dollars will roll in, I tell you. Ha, ha!"

"I suppose you'll be busy all day?"

"Until five o'clock."

"So that if my samples arrive I'd better see you later?"

"Yes. I could give no time to you before."

"Very well. I've got some letters to write now, so I'll bid you good-evening."

Jim Cummins had achieved complete success.

He had discovered everything.

He knew practically all the entrances and exits of the store.

He had ascertained where the safe was, and the habits of Mr. Taylor.

What more could be desired?

It would be the easiest thing in the world now for the bandits to break into the house and seize Mr. Taylor's money.

Back to the hotel went Jim Cummins.

There he stayed until it was quite dark.

Then he left it, for his intention was to pay Jesse James a visit without any loss of time.

Jesse James was expecting him.

He did not anticipate, however, that Jim Cummins would appear until after dark.

"Well, Jim, how goes it?"

"Complete success."

"You don't say!"

"But I do. I've had a great time. Nothing could be better."

"Tell me all about it."

"Sure."

With great interest, Jesse James listened to Jim Cummins' story.

"By gosh, that was a darned good idea of yours, Jim."

"Yes. It came to me entirely through finding that card in my pocket."

"You seem to have played your game well."

"I hope so."

"The safe's not in the store then?"

"No, Jesse, but old man Taylor's house adjoins the store. There's a door from the room the safe's in to the store itself."

"This door's closed at night?"

"No doubt, but it's only an ordinary door. We can break it open if we want to."

"That's so."

"At ten o'clock everybody in the house is in bed."

"Who sleeps there?"

"Mr. Taylor, his wife, his daughter and the cuss who had dinner with me, and a coon. That's all."

"Three men and two women," laughed the bandit king. "It's a soft snap."

"We can't fail."

"Don't try it to-night."

"Why not?"

"Because there'll be more money in the safe to-morrow night."

"How's that?"

"Didn't I tell you that he does most of his business on what he calls market day. That's to-morrow."

"Oh, very well," assented the bandit king. "I think perhaps that is better. I'd have all my work to do to get the boys here in time."

"Now, listen to me, Jim."

"Go on!"

"To-morrow night we'll break into this store."

"Well?"

"I shall have all the boys with me."

"Where shall I find you?"

"At this place."

"At what hour?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"I shall be on hand."

"Mind you are, for we'll want you to guide us. We don't stand much show without you, Jim."

"Don't be afraid; I'll be here."

"Before I go is there anything more that you want to say?"

"Nothing, Jesse."

"Then I'm off."

The bandit king mounted his horse, and at a great pace rode away.

Jim Cummins slowly went back to his hotel.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER ON THE TRAIL OF THE BANDITS.

Unknown to Jim Cummins he had been shadowed when he left the hotel.

Mr. Henshaw was on his trail.

But in some way the bandit's trail had been lost soon after leaving the town.

Mr. Henshaw waited for considerable time in hopes that the man he had been shadowing might reappear.

Then all at once a horseman, riding at a furious pace, dashed by him.

This was Jesse James, but he did not know it.

However, he was impressed somewhat by the incident.

For he knew quite well, owing to the direction from which he had appeared, that the horseman had not come from the town.

And there seemed to be no house near from which he could have ridden.

Somehow, Mr. Henshaw could not refrain from connecting this mysterious horseman with the drummer who had aroused his suspicions.

Concluding that he could see nothing more of the latter, he resolved to go back to the hotel.

"Anyway, I'll get an answer to my telegram," he said, "and if it's all right I'll conclude I have been making a fool of myself—not the first time," he added, laughingly; "but if it should turn out differently, then——"

He did not complete the sentence.

The homely saying that it is not wise to cross a bridge until you come to it occurred to him.

When he got back to the hotel the drummer was there.

There was no telegram for Mr. Henshaw.

He was considerably annoyed at this, and could not understand the reason for the remissness of Gordon & Sons in not replying.

The next morning about ten o'clock Mr. Henshaw received an answer to the message he had sent to Gordon & Sons.

"Have no representative in Kentucky at present. Geo. W. Reed not known to us."

This is what the telegram said.

It gave Mr. Henshaw no information as to who the drummer was.

But it discredited entirely the story he had told.

It therefore increased the suspicion that Mr. Henshaw entertained for him.

He knew now that the drummer had some motive which he wished to conceal.

What was his purpose in staying in Hartford?

This was the problem which Mr. Henshaw set himself to solve.

It was a difficult one.

He felt that his only chance to learn anything was by keeping a constant watch on the drummer.

Jim Cummins had little to do until eleven o'clock arrived.

Then, according to arrangement, he was to meet the bandit king and the rest of the men.

He went into Mr. Taylor's store and informed him that as his samples had not yet arrived he was unable to transact any business.

Night came.

About ten o'clock Jim Cummins, who had been exceedingly restless, determined to leave the hotel.

Although it was late, yet little notice would be taken of his departure.

They would expect him back again in a short time.

Once more the bandit was shadowed.

He left the town, going slowly, because he had a lot of time before him.

But on this occasion he had not the same good fortune as on his last visit to the hut where Jesse James was.

Mr. Henshaw managed to keep on the trail of the bandit.

He saw him enter the old hut.

The shadower stayed in some bushes close at hand.

He was in a state of great expectancy.

For he believed that he was about to hear something that would enlighten him as to the reasons for the deception that the drummer was practicing.

But what he saw fairly astounded him.

Out of the darkness, treading almost noiselessly, as if they feared to be seen, he saw dark forms appearing.

He counted ten.

All of them went into the hut.

Mr. Henshaw had not seen the faces of any of these men.

In the gloom that prevailed it was as much as he could do to detect their forms.

He wished to see and hear more.

Softly he crept toward the hut.

Now he realized the terrible peril in which he stood.

It was apparent that the men whom he had seen enter the hut so stealthily were not engaged on any lawful errand.

He was convinced that they had come there to execute some desperate purpose.

"If I'm heard it's all over with me," he muttered.

But intent upon gaining a knowledge of the object for which these men had met, he did not think of danger.

He lost sight of the peril in which he stood.

Now he was close to the hut.

He could see nothing.

The door appeared to be open, for the murmur of voices came to him as they would not have done had it been closed.

But there was no light in the hut.

So he could see nothing.

Still determined on pursuing his quest to the end, Mr. Henshaw moved nearer to the hut.

Leaning over until his ears almost touched the walls of the shanty, at length he was able to distinguish the words that were passing within.

"So you think everything's gone all right, Jim?"

"Yes, Jesse, I'm dead sure of it."

"Jesse! Jim!"

These two names brought back a flood of recollection to the listener's mind.

"Great heaven!" he exclaimed, "I must have been blind. Of course I knew that man all the time. What a fool I was not to recognize Cummins."

Now Mr. Henshaw knew with whom he had to deal.

It was the James Boys!

Within a few yards of where he was standing these desperadoes were plotting some dark scheme.

What was he to do?

This was the question that presented itself to his mind.

To continue the conversation in the hut:

"Glad to hear it," said the bandit king, in response to the assurance from Jim Cummins that all was well.

"And, by gosh, he's taken a lot of money to-day. The store's been crowded."

"So much the better for us."

"When I came through the town I found it quite deserted," said Jim Cummins. "There was not a soul about. People were all in bed."

"Now, let's settle what's to be done," said the bandit king. "How're we to get in?"

"I've thought of that," said the other speaker, Jim Cummins.

"Well?"

"There's a field at the back of the store."

"Go on."

"We can get into this field without going into the town at all."

"That's good!"

"Yes; I'll show you the way."

"What next?"

"At the end of the field we'll come to the store."

"I know that."

"Now, here's the point, I guess," said Jim Cummins, with a laugh, "it's not much trouble for us to open a window."

"I should smile."

"Well, Frank, there's a window quite near the ground. On opening that we can crawl through. Then we will be in the store."

"But the safe's not there."

"I know, but there's a door leading through into the next house where the safe is. That we can open pretty easily."

"All right."

"See here," interrupted a voice, which Mr. Henshaw knew to be that of Cole Younger, "it seems to me, boys, that we can open that door without making a darned bit of noise."

"Well?"

"That'll wake up the people."

"If it does?"

"Great Scott! They've only got to put their heads out of the window and alarm the whole town."

"That looks bad, Jim," said the bandit king. "What have you got to say to it?"

"It'll take some time to arouse the people. We'll have the door open in a minute, and they won't have made more than one shout before we'll be able to quiet them."

"Very well, let's try it."

"I don't like it at all," growled Cole Younger. "It's a bad plan."

"Oh, don't worry, Cole," said the bandit king, with a laugh, "it'll go through right enough."

Up to this time the name of the proprietor of the store had not been mentioned.

But Mr. Henshaw had no doubt on this point.

He knew that Jim Cummins had devoted his attention to the store of Moses Taylor.

It seemed pretty certain therefore that that place was selected for the operation of the bandits.

"Old man Taylor'll have a bit of a surprise," laughed Jim Cummins.

"Yes—when he sees you with your samples!" cried the bandit king.

Jim Cummins had laid his plans so well that in their minds the result must be success.

Cole Younger alone was doubtful.

"Say, boys," he said.

"Well?"

"I want to say something."

"Go on."

"Aren't you satisfied yet?" cried Jesse James.

"I've got something to propose which I fancy'll make the thing safer."

"If it's any good we'll try it, Cole."

"Here it is, Jesse. When you cusses are in the house don't operate on the door at once."

"Thunder! Why not?"

"Wait till I've fixed things."

"How?"

"I'll be out in the street."

"Go on."

"As soon as you've had time to get in the store I'll ring the house-bell."

"Great Scott! Why?"

"Old man Taylor will come down and open the door. Then two or three of us can rush in. We'll have a better chance."

"That's certainly an improvement."

"What's the good of our going in the store at all?" asked Wood Hite.

"Because it's just possible," answered the bandit king, "that the door may not be opened when Cole rings the bell."

"True. So we'll have two strings to our bow."

"Yes."

The bandits seemed to have arranged everything

At any rate, Mr. Henshaw, who had listened to every word that had been said, seemed to think that there was not the slightest likelihood of their plans being altered.

"The villains!" he muttered. "I must foil them somehow."

He considered it unwise to stay where he was a moment longer.

So stealthily he crept along the ground, moving noiselessly until he had got a considerable distance from the hut.

Then at a great pace he set off for the store.

He had not left the vicinity of the hut long when the bandits started.

Jesse James, Jim Cummins and Cole Younger knew the situation of the store.

So the bandits split up into three parties, each under one of these men.

Jesse James and Jim Cummins with their associates did not enter the town.

They made for the field at the back of the store.

Cole Younger, who was to endeavor to effect an entrance into the house by the front door, went into the town.

With him were two of the bandits.

Arrived at the house, Jim Cummins found the window through which the entrance to the store was to be made.

As he had said, it was near the ground.

Bob Ford opened it easily.

In doing so he scarcely made a sound.

Jesse was the first to enter.

The two other bandits were close at his heels.

Frank James, and the bandits who were with him, spread out in order to stand guard.

Selecting certain very dark spots at various points, these sentinels stood still and as noiseless as statues, keeping their ears open for every sound.

"Show the light, Bob," whispered the bandit king. "I'll fall over one of these boxes if you don't."

Bob Ford had a dark lantern with him.

This light was displayed.

Then the bandits saw that they had come to the door that divided the dwelling house of the proprietor from the store.

Jesse turned the handle. He found, as he had expected, that the door was locked.

But a slight examination showed him that Jim Cummins had correctly stated the case.

The door would be no serious obstacle to the designs of the bandits.

For three men, by putting their shoulders against it, could force it open.

"Let's do it," whispered Bob Ford.

Jesse put his hand on his comrade's arm to restrain him.

"Wait a bit, Bob," he said, in a whisper, "don't you recollect an arrangement with Cole Younger?"

"I forgot that."

"Wished to thunder he'd ring that bell," growled Jim Cummins.

"I'll let him know we're here."

"How?"

"You'll see."

Jesse James took the lantern, and moved to the front part of the store, near the street.

Then, pulling the shade aside for an instant, he displayed the lantern.

"That'll start him," said the bandit king, as he rejoined his companions.

Cole Younger had seen the light.

Naturally he concluded that his comrades were ready for action.

He spoke to the two men who were with him.

"Stand under the porch. In case the old cuss opens the window and looks out, I don't want you to be seen."

"How'll you get him to open the door, Cole?"

Cole Younger laughed.

He waited a moment or two to see if there was any response.

Now, as a rule, people who are in bed are not apt to jump out and run downstairs without losing an instant.

It was so in this case.

Cole Younger was impatient.

So he rang the bell again.

Then he heard the window above him open.

This was what he anticipated.

A head came out.

"What in thunder do you want at this time of night? You're in a bit of a hurry, I should reckon."

"You bet I am!"

"Well, what is it?"

"D'you know a man named George W. Reed?"

"George W. Reed?"

"Yes."

"He's staying at the Southern Hotel."

"He was," said Cole Younger. "He's dead now."

"Dead!"

"Yes—shot through the head in a row. Heard you knew him, so down I came."

"I'm amazed! What's to be done about it?"

"I'd like to have a talk with you."

"So you shall."

"Don't be long."

"I'm coming down at once."

The window was closed.

"Didn't I tell you?" chuckled Cole Younger, as he turned smilingly to his two associates.

"Gosh, Cole, you jollied him well."

Now, Jesse James and his two comrades had heard the bell ring twice.

They knew that Cole Younger was at work.

Then they could hear the murmur of conversation outside as Cole Younger talked to the man at the window.

The three bandits laughed when, on opening a window slightly, they distinguished the words that were being said.

"So he's killed you, Jim," whispered the bandit king.

"Yes. George W. Reed's gone," replied Jim Cummins, "but he's done his work well."

"Listen!" hissed Bob Ford, as he placed his hand on the bandit king's arm.

"What?"

"Don't you hear?"

"No."

"Some one's coming downstairs."

"Gosh, that's so. Get ready, boys!" said the bandit king, softly; "directly I give the signal we'll force the door open."

"Shall we break through before Cole Younger's in the house?"

"Yes. I'd rather not have that street door open," said the bandit king. "I don't think there's any one about, but if there is there's more chance of us being heard."

"Why, that's so, Jesse."

There was no doubt that some one was coming downstairs.

"It's Moses Taylor," said Jim Cummins. "He was doing the talking."

"Yes, I expect it is him. Anyway, there's only one, so we've nothing to fear."

"Not much."

"Directly the door's open flash the light through."

"All right, Jesse."

"Now!" said the bandit king, in a clear, distinct voice.

It was time to act.

The door was as weak as the bandits had imagined.

Against their united efforts it could offer no resistance.

With a crash the lock gave way.

The door was open.

Bang! Bang!

Bang! Bang!

Four shots were fired instantly.

One of them struck Jesse James on the sleeve of his coat, piercing the material of which it was composed, and grazing the arm slightly above the elbow.

Another shot struck the glass of the lantern which Bob Ford was in the act of raising to throw some light on the scene.

From the bandit's hand the lantern fell. The light was extinguished.

The bandits were in total darkness.

The two other shots had done no damage, though it was certain that they must have passed very close to the bandits.

"Bang! Bang!"

Two more shots were fired.

But the bandits were not staying to make targets of themselves.

They had sprung back into the store.

Bob Ford had managed to bring the lantern with him.

The desperadoes were speechless with astonishment.

They were so amazed that they did not know how to act.

For they had met with a reception that they had not reckoned upon.

Outside the shots were distinctly heard.

Cole Younger and his comrades had not expected such warm work.

And besides they were surprised at the door not being opened.

"Jesse's been too quick," said Cole Younger, angrily; "if he'd waited a moment the door would have been opened."

"There's a light in the store, Cole," said one of the bandits.

"By heaven, there it is again! Wonder what it means?"

"It's a signal from Jesse. He wants us!"

"Great Scott! That must be so."

The three bandits hurried off to the back of the store.

Then they rapidly effected an entrance through the window by which the other three bandits had obtained admission.

Bob Ford had lit the lantern, and he had been signalling to Cole Younger as the latter imagined.

"What's up, Jesse?"

"Ask me something easier, Cole."

"Why don't you go on with the work?"

"Curse it! It's as much as we can do to keep from getting shot."

"Eh? Afraid of one man?"

"One man be darued," said the bandit king, in savage tones; "one man doesn't fire four shots at once."

"I saw three men!" exclaimed Bob Ford.

"What's to be done then?" asked Cole Younger.

"I'm for going on," said Jim Cummins. "There are six of us here."

"We ought to be able to manage it," said the bandit king; "and, by heaven," he cried fiercely, "we will!"

"I told you there were three men in the house," said Jim Cummins. "Moses Taylor, his son, and the coon."

"There's six of us, boys," said the bandit king; "shall we go on, or give up?"

"Fight! Fight!" they cried.

"Very well."

The bandits were on the point of advancing to the attack.

They had just turned toward the door which led from the store to the adjoining house.

Bob Ford had exposed himself.

Bang!

Instantly a shot came whizzing by him.

Before another pistol could be fired, or anything could be done, hurried footsteps were heard approaching the door.

Frank James was making toward the place.

"Save yourselves, boys!" he cried, in frantic tones; "the place is alive with people!"

CHAPTER XII.

JESSE JAMES' GREAT PERIL.

The bandits in the house knew now that it was impossible to obtain the money for which they had come.

It was as much as they could do to save themselves.

"D'you hear, Frank?" shouted Jesse James.

"Yes."

"Let's clear."

"You bet!"

The six bandits rushed through the store toward the window at the back, which was still open.

Now, six men cannot go through one window at once.

And in their haste they made matters worse.

Whilst they were struggling as to who should get through first, the men who had been firing at them came into the store.

Bang! Bang!

Two of them fired.

Then, without waiting a moment, they dashed away.

This time Ed Kelly was hit.

A bullet struck him on the thigh, passing through the fleshy part, but avoiding the bone.

To return the fire was out of question.

Jesse James was so frantic with rage that he was almost mad enough to have done so.

But furious as he was, he had yet sufficient prudence to see the folly of such a proceeding.

The bandits were through the window.

Frank James and the men who had been standing on guard with him joined them.

"They're coming, Jesse."

"Have you seen them, Frank?"

"Yes, in the distance."

"Which way shall we go?"

"Why, back to the horses!"

"Don't I know that?"

"Better run through this field!" shouted Jim Cummins. "It's our best chance."

"Very well."

"Across the grass rushed the bandits."

Mounting, they rode away.

Up came a crowd of people.

Some of them were only half dressed.

They were of all ages, and carried every conceivable kind of weapon.

Outside the door of the house they halted.

"Where are they?" cried the leader.

"Gone through the field at the back!" shouted a man who dashed through the open door of the house into the street. "After them!"

It was Mr. Henshaw who spoke.

The man leading the crowd was young Taylor, the son of the proprietor of the store.

During the few minutes that the door had been left unguarded he had stolen from the house, unperceived, to summon assistance.

Mr. Henshaw preferred this arrangement, for he thought it was his duty to remain and take part in the defense of the place, whatever risk he might run in so doing.

Now the party turned around the side of the house and darted down the road which ran along the edge of the field.

They were in such numbers that the bandits would have little show if by chance any of these men should get near enough to make them stop and fight.

Mr. Henshaw was not with them.

He turned aside unperceived.

As fast as his legs would carry him he started for the hut.

What made him do this?

It seems somewhat inexplicable that the man who was apparently best capable of leading the attack should so suddenly desert his associates.

He had his reasons, however, as will appear.

The stranger rushed to the hut, making a desperate effort to reach it before Jesse James got there.

For he was quite confident that the bandit king would go there.

First, he entered the hut. Then he concealed himself as he had done when he had remained earlier in the evening listening to the talk of the bandits.

In a few minutes he heard heavy footsteps coming toward him at a great pace.

"It's the man I want," he muttered.

It would be affectation to pretend he was not somewhat excited.

Who is there that would not have been at finding the most dreaded character in the country, the bandit king of America, a few yards away.

It was the bandit king.

There was no mistake about that.

Faint though the light was, and rapidly as the man ran, there was no room for errors.

It was Jesse James himself, who, without halting for one instant, entered the hut.

Mr. Henshaw heard him go rapidly across it.

"He's unhitching his horse," he muttered. "Now's my time."

Quick as lightning he darted forward.

He made a step into the hut.

Then, grasping the door, with great rapidity, he pulled it toward him.

It closed with a bang.

The rapid glances that Mr. Henshaw had taken into the hut on his arrival showed him that the key was strangely enough in the lock on the outside.

Whether it would turn was another question.

He blamed himself for not having seen to this point.

But the haste with which he had to do everything must be his excuse.

He seized the key. It turned.

His triumph was complete.

Jesse James was a prisoner.

He was locked in the hut.

The bandit king had heard the noise behind him.

The footsteps were audible, and he had left his horse the instant they came to his notice.

But he was too late to prevent what had happened.

Before he could interfere the door had been shut and locked.

Then Jesse James realized what a desperate position he was in.

"A prisoner!" he gasped. "By heaven, this is maddening!"

Furious with rage, he sprang at the door.

Against it he hurled his weight.

But the wood was stout, notwithstanding the age of the building.

It never yielded to the pressure applied.

"It's no good, Jesse James," said a voice. "This time I've got you!"

The bandit king was paralyzed with astonishment.

He knew now what had happened.

Once more Cherry had been too much for the bandits.

Jesse James recognized his captor's voice.

It was that of Don Martin, Pinkerton's celebrated detective.

This made matters worse.

If he had been in the hands of some ignorant country official, he might have got away.

But how was he to do so now?

"Thunder!" said the bandit king to himself, as he paced up and down the hut. "What shall I do. It seems to me that I won't get any help from the boys."

Naturally they would make for their horses, which were at some little distance from the hut, and ride away.

But to his enemy Jesse James exhibited no symptom of fear.

He professed to regard the matter as a good joke.

"Ha, ha!"

"Glad you take it so well," said the detective, for the man who has been mentioned as Mr. Henshaw was no other than Don Martin. "It's no good being cast down. All men in your line have to be hanged some day."

The prospect of being jailed, with the chance of losing his life if he was, by no means gratified him.

There was, in the wall of the hut, a small window.

To be more correct, it will be better to style it an aperture.

For the glance had long since gone.

Jesse James went toward it.

Then, raising his pistol, he fired several times in rapid succession.

Bang! Bang!

Bang! Bang!

Don Martin sprang aside.

He fancied that the bandit king might hit him, but still he could not conceive how it was possible.

"Fire away, Jesse!" he cried.

The bandit king made no reply.

But he fired again.

Bang! Bang!

"He's crazy!" muttered the detective.

Several horsemen could be heard approaching.

Then, for the first time, the detective understood why Jesse James had been firing off his pistol so aimlessly.

"By heaven! He's beaten me!" cried the detective.

He knew that help was at hand.

"Gosh, what a fool I was!" said the detective to himself. "If I'd brought two or three men with me I might have held out."

He saw that all was lost.

Again Jesse James had beaten him.

The thought of his failure rendered Don Martin desperate.

"There's one chance," he said. "If I can't capture him, I may kill him."

As he hissed out the words his eyes flashed fire.

Not a moment did he lose.

Quick as lightning he turned the key in the lock and threw the door open.

Then, thrusting his arm into the hut, he fired.

Bang!

He was able to see the dark form of the bandit king.

But the shot missed him.

To stay was to die.

Four horsemen were at hand.

Quick as lightning Don Martin plunged into the bushes.

As he did so Jim Cummins, Bob Ford and Wood Hite galloped up.

Already Jesse James was leading his horse out of the hut.

"It's me, boys!" he cried.

"Jesse?"

"Yes."

"Heard the shots. Thought it might be you, so we came along."

"What's the game?" cried Bob Ford.

"Can't talk now. Let's get away."

"Very well."

Without another word the bandits galloped away.

When they had ridden about a mile they overtook their comrades.

Not once did the bandits draw rein until they found themselves in their mountain retreat.

It might be imagined that this daring outrage enraged the people of the district.

And it alarmed them, too.

It was certainly not pleasant to know that the terrible James Boys were carrying on their operations in Kentucky.

Before the authorities could be communicated with the bandits had reached their camp.

The next day deputies were patrolling the country in all directions.

Numbers of detectives were in the state.

Everything that suggested itself was done.

But all was in vain. There was no trace of the bandits.

Meanwhile the bandits, during all this excitement, had remained in their camp.

They chafed under the restraint which they had to put upon themselves. But their lives depended upon it, so no other course was possible.

The day after the failure of their scheme the talk naturally turned upon it.

"See here," said Bob Ford, as they were all lying on the grass, smoking, "we've struck a streak of bad luck."

"What of it?"

"Jim didn't plan this thing very well."

"Are you speaking about me, Clell?" cried Jim Cummins,

angrily turning to Clell Miller, with an angry look upon his face.

"Don't get riled, Jim," said Clell Miller. "Any one can make a mistake."

"Say," said Jesse.

"Did you speak to me?" asked Jim Cummins, angrily.

"I did."

"Well, what is it?"

"I want to know who you saw at the Southern Hotel."

"A good many people."

"Yes, but I mean among the guests."

"Oh, there were only two or three there."

"Can you describe them?"

"Why, certainly. It's not a habit of mine to go through the world with my eyes shut."

Jesse smiled.

"Let's hear about them."

"There was a cuss with red hair who walked lame."

"Next."

"A man with gray hair and beard, and spectacles."

"Stop! What about him?"

"Nothing special."

"You think not?"

"Great Scott! no. He was just an everyday business man down South selling goods."

Jesse James roared with laughter.

"See here, Jim," he said. "I've got something to tell you. That 'everyday business man down South selling goods' was Don Martin."

Jim Cummins never spoke.

He stared hard at the bandit king.

But he saw he was talking seriously.

"Yes, boys, I know it," continued Jesse James. "He trailed me to the hut after we left the store, and, by gosh, if some of you hadn't come up I might have been in jail now."

"Are you sure, Jesse?"

"Am I sure? Why, thunder, I had a talk with him. That ought to be enough."

The bandits were enraged beyond measure.

Now they knew how it was their scheme had failed.

"By heaven!" cried Jim Cummins, furiously, "I don't want to leave Kentucky now. I'll stay and fight it out."

The knowledge that Don Martin, Pinkerton's celebrated detective, was near, instead of scaring the bandits, had a contrary effect.

It caused them to determine that they would remain where they were.

Their passions were aroused, and they resolved to be revenged.

Once more the bandits ventured forth.

Seldom was more than three of them away at any one time.

Jesse James had almost exhausted his powers of thinking.

His mind had been set on holding up a train.

Such a thing as this in Kentucky would be quite out of the common, and therefore being unexpected, the danger was lessened.

But, unfortunately for the bandits, their leader was unable to obtain any accurate information that would justify him in undertaking such a hazardous proposition.

At this particular time Jim Cummins and Jesse James were absent from the camp.

They were not near each other.

Jim Cummins was traveling around in the neighborhood of Glasgow.

Jesse James was at Russellville.

It was a very fine morning when Jim Cummins found himself riding along the road that led from Glasgow.

Ahead of him Jim Cummins saw a man walking along the road in the same direction as that in which he found himself traveling.

Judging by the pace at which the pedestrian was moving, he seemed exceedingly fatigued.

"Guess he belongs to these parts," said the bandit to himself. "If so, he may be able to tell me something I want to know."

"Then he spoke aloud:

"Say!"

"Wall?"

"I'd like to know if there is any place near where I can get a drink and rest out of this sun for a bit."

"'Bout a mile ahead there's an inn. I'm goin' to it."

"Thank you. Guess I'll make a bee line for it myself."

A few minutes brought him to the place to which the tramp had directed him.

First of all the bandit put his horse in the barn.

Then he watered him and gave him his feed.

The bandits loved their horses, and always saw to the wants of their steeds before attending to their own.

Then he went in the inn and ordered some whiskey. It was very good liquor, and the bandit drank it with great relish. He then took a newspaper from his pocket and began to read it. Up came the tramp. "Oh, you're here at last," said the bandit. "Reckon so." "They're expecting you." "Out with you!" shouted the landlord, "your sort don't come in here." "Reckon we do when we've got the stuff on us. Thet talks, doesn't it?" asked the tramp. With which remark he took a dollar bill from his pocket and threw it on the table. The landlord stood irresolute for a moment. "Well, s'pose you must come in," he said at length. "Your money's as good as any one else's." The stranger had to brush past the landlord, whose bulky form almost filled up the narrow doorway. In doing so his hat was disarranged. Jim Cummins, who was contemplating the scene with an amused look on his face, gave a start. For he saw that the tramp wore a disguise.

CHAPTER XIII.

JESSE JAMES RESOLVES TO TRY TO ROB THE BANK AT RUSSELLVILLE.

It was but natural that this should have surprised the bandit. If the man was a tramp why did he need to so disguise himself. He resolved to watch the tramp. It was absolutely necessary that he should do so. Jim Cummins entered into conversation with the man. He found him quite talkative, but it seemed somehow to the bandit that the tramp was doing all the questioning. "He's pumping me," thought Jim Cummins. This further increased the suspicions he entertained of the tramp. Time passed along. It was getting toward evening. Jim Cummins manifested a disposition to leave. He went out of the house, it being now quite cool, and strolled up and down the road, smoking his pipe. Coming to a halt, he leaned against the side of the house. Through the open window he heard the following talk: It was taking place between the landlord and the tramp. "Say!" "Well?" "Reckon I'll stay hyar the night." "You can." "Hyar's yer money then." "And here's your room," said the landlord. "I'm dead tired. Reckon I'll lay down." "D'you want me to wake you in the morning?" "No! Thunder! I'll sleep right on. I've had none for two days."

"Very well." Evidently the tramp had gone into a room, for a door was closed and bolted. Then something strange happened. From where Jim Cummins was he could see into the room which the tramp had entered. The bandit was concealed from observation by a creeping plant which grew over the inn and hung thickly about its walls. He was taking no particular notice of anything, but, purely by accident, the bandit's eyes chanced to fall upon the window of the room in which the tramp was. On the wall of the room hung a small mirror. The bandit saw a face in the glass. It was that of the tramp. The man seemed to be contemplating himself with a gratified smile. Then, to Jim Cummins' amazement, the tramp removed from his head the wig he was wearing. What a change! And a startling one! Jim Cummins almost uttered a cry, so great was his astonishment. The face in the mirror was that of Don Martin, the detective. For a moment or two Jim Cummins was too amazed to move. Then softly he walked away and entered the inn.

His mind was in a whirl. What should he do? Should he attack Don Martin and kill him? Or rather, could he do so? The landlord was a total stranger to Jim Cummins. At length Jim Cummins came to a decision. The tramp would not be leaving until the next day. There was ample time for him to ride back to the camp and acquaint his comrades with the condition of affairs. Having come to this resolve, he lost no time in carrying it out. So he mounted his horse and rode away. It was quite dark before he reached the camp of the bandits. But the men were up and talking in a lively fashion around a fire, which gave out a welcome heat, for the night was chilly, although the day had been hot. "Hulloa, Jesse," cried Jim Cummins, "yer back." "Yes." "How long?" "A few minutes." "Got anything to tell us?" "Let's hear your story first." "Oh, I haven't much news," said Jim Cummins, quietly. "I only happen to know where Don Martin is asleep at the present moment." "What!" The startled bandits uttered this exclamation. "Why didn't you kill him?" asked Frank James, fiercely. "For several reasons," answered Jim Cummins; "one of them's enough, though. I couldn't." Then rapidly Jim Cummins related to his astonished comrades all that had passed. He told them in what way the discovery was made. "And where is this inn?" asked Cole Younger. "About six miles this side of Glasgow." "I know it," cried Bob Ford. "Bet your life, Bob. You'd know any place where whiskey's to be got." There was a laugh at this. "Then he's in our power," said Frank James. "Sure." "We could ride over there and surprise him." "Certainly." "You don't think he knew you, Jim, do you?" "I'm dead sure he didn't." "I believe that," said Cole Younger. "Jim defies detection this time." "Here, wake up, Jesse." The bandit king had been sitting quite silent, taking no part in the discussion. "I'm listening, boys." "Well?" "What d'you want of me?" "Shall we ride over and attack Don Martin?" "No." "That beats me," said Cole Younger. "And me," cried Al Shepard. "Jesse's joking." "I'm not, Bob. I'm quite serious," replied the bandit king. A look of passion came over his face as he continued: "I want this man killed as much as any of you, but not now. It would interfere with my plans." "Plans? Is there anything on?" "You believe me." "Where?" "At Russellville." "What is it?" "A bank to be robbed, and we shall get not less than fifty thousand dollars." "Fifty thousand dollars!" exclaimed Frank James, "that's a big sum." "I know all about it." "It can be done?" "Sure, or I wouldn't say so. You know me, boys." "Yes. Tell us all about it." "Here! I want to say something! Why can't we kill Don Martin," asked Jim Cummins, "and rob this bank as well?" The bandit king laughed. "He'll be killed right enough, if my plans are carried out." "How?" "This is going to be a case of diamond cut diamond," laughed the bandit king. "I'm darned glad you've located this man. Now we'll have nothing to fear. I mean to lay a trap for him." "How?" "Why, we must contrive to keep him out of the way." "When's the attack at Russellville to be made?" "To-morrow morning."

"What! In the day time?"

"Yes."

"Early to-morrow morning two of you must meet at the inn."

"Well?"

"You'll easily find out if he is still there. If he is, you must begin to talk, not too loud, but take darned good care that he'll hear what's said."

"But what are we to say?"

"Why, boys, you can invent that as well as me," said the bandit king. "You must let him think we are going to operate somewhere else. See?"

"That can be done."

"Shall we take part in the robbery at the bank?"

"Thunder, no! You'll be miles away. You must keep this man trailing you. That's what you're to do."

Ed Kelly looked somewhat sullen.

"It's all right, Ed," said the bandit king; "you boys'll both have your share of the plunder."

"I know that. I was thinking, though, that we would miss all the fun."

"Fun! By heaven, no!" answered the bandit king, quickly. "You'll have more fun than we shall."

"How's that?"

"Because, Ed, you'll be able to work your plan so that you can kill Don Martin."

"Great Scott! We will! Now I'll go with pleasure."

It was settled that Ed Kelly and Wood Hite should leave the camp not later than three o'clock in the morning.

About six o'clock in the morning of the following day the landlord of the inn heard a man ride hurriedly up to the door.

Before he could open it and look out, the horseman was entering the inn.

He walked into the place with a swaggering air, and apparently the more noise he made the better he was pleased.

"Say, mister!" said the landlord.

"Well?"

"There is a cuss sleeping in that room. Reckon you'll disturb him."

"By gosh! he ought to be disturbed. It's time for any man to be up," replied the horseman, bringing his fist down on the table. "Let's have some whiskey. That's more to the point."

The landlord resented the man's tone, but there was a look in the stranger's eye which seemed to say it was policy to let him alone.

"Anybody been here to-day?" asked the stranger, at length.

"It's early."

"Can't you answer my question?"

"Why, no."

"If you'd said that before you'd have saved time and your breath as well."

The stranger rose from his seat and walked to the window. There he stood, looking down the road.

He heard a noise behind him.

He knew what it was, but he never turned his head.

It was the tramp, or rather the detective opening his door slightly, so as to get a view of the stranger, and also that he might hear what was being said.

The horseman was Ed Kelly.

He laughed inwardly when he saw how well the scheme was beginning to work.

"Ah, here he is!" he cried.

This exclamation was called forth by the appearance of a solitary horseman, who was spurring hard along the dusty road.

In a few minutes he had joined his comrade.

The newcomer was Wood Hite.

"Got here at last, Wood," said the first bandit. "Thought you'd be here before me."

"So I should, only I mistook the way. Gosh! I'll drink before I talk, Ed, and wash some of this dust out of my mouth."

The two bandits sat down at a table not far from the door of the room in which Don Martin, the detective, was.

Wood Hite had his back to the door.

Ed Kelly was facing it. He was ready to draw his six-shooter the instant it appeared necessary for him to do so.

For it was just possible that the detective might try to capture the two men.

"It's all settled?"

"Yes, Wood."

The door of the adjoining room opened.

Out walked the tramp.

He looked hard at the two strangers, and then took a seat not far away.

Ed Kelly saw through this move.

The detective found that in order to hear what was being said, he would have to keep his door open.

If he did this he would cause suspicion. The bandits might not talk.

Ed Kelly's reasoning was quite correct.

It was the motive that had animated the detective in showing himself. For he was very anxious to hear what was being said, as he had recognized the two horsemen as belonging to the James Boys.

Decidedly this was a stroke of luck.

Unfortunately for Don Martin, he did not know that the man at the inn on the previous evening was Jim Cummins.

And thus he was ignorant entirely of the fact that a trap was being laid for him.

For once was he at fault.

He fell into the trap very readily.

Don Martin had heard enough to know that the bandits had planned to rob some bank.

This word came to his ears.

But where was this bank? This was what he did not know. For the name of the place where the bank was had only been mentioned in a whisper.

The detective was annoyed.

How could he find out what was to be done?

He must wait and listen.

The talk went on. Again, much of what was said came to his ears.

"Jesse wants us to stay in town and keep our eyes about. You see there are a good many detectives in the state, and we don't want to fall into a trap this time."

"Ha! Ha!" chuckled Don Martin, as he heard the remark. "What a surprise you'll have."

Don Martin congratulated himself on his wonderful luck.

The way in which he ran across these bandits from time to time was truly marvelous.

Still, despite all his luck, the fact remained that the name of the town where the bank robbery was to take place was still unknown to him.

"There's only one thing for it," said the detective to himself: "I must keep on the trail of these men until I've found out where the bank is."

To do so it was necessary for him to go to Glasgow, because it was at this town that the bandits intended to take the train.

The detective walked toward the landlord.

"Say!"

"Where kin I strike the train?"

"At Glasgow."

The tramp hurried away.

The two bandits walked to the window to look after him. They saw him toiling along the road.

"He's going to Glasgow right enough."

"You bet he is."

"We'll see him."

Ed Kelly took a piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket. He scribbled these lines:

"The road will be clear. Don Martin won't trouble you. He'll follow us, for he's swallowed the yarn we gave him. Ed."

For nearly half an hour longer the bandits remained at the inn.

Then they mounted their horses and rode on toward Glasgow.

After going about two miles the horsemen came to a stop.

Ed Kelly dismounted.

He looked up and down the road to see that no one was in sight. Then he placed the letter he had written in the hollow of a big tree that grew by the roadside.

He knew that one of the bandits would come there for news.

At length the two bandits reached Glasgow.

The first thing they did was to stable their horse. Then they walked through the little town toward the depot.

When the bandits arrived at the depot all doubts they might have had were removed.

There was the tramp standing at the station, apparently waiting for the train.

The bandits took their tickets for Benton.

As soon as a westward bound train came along they boarded it.

And they had the satisfaction of seeing that the tramp did the same.

He made no attempt to keep out of their way.

They were in the smoking car.

He took his seat there as well.

As he passed them he remarked:

"Why, yer gain' ther same way as me, gentlemen. May I ask whar?"

"Benton."

"That's mighty strange. That's the spot I'm bound for."

"Then we'll see more of each other."

"Sure."

The bandits and the detective were each delighted. But the former had the most reason to be.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BANDITS SETTLE ALL THEIR PLANS FOR ROBBING THE BANK.

Bob Ford arrived back at the camp with the letter which Ed Kelly had placed in the hollow tree.

"It's all right, Jesse."

"Let's see."

Bob Ford tossed the letter over to him.

"Where've they gone?" asked Frank James.

"To Benton."

"A long way."

"So much the better. There's less chance of his getting back."

The bandits were jubilant.

"Now, boys, about this bank business. We haven't settled it yet."

"We're waiting for you to talk."

"Anyway, it'll be to-morrow morning."

"At what time?"

"That's a question I can't answer just now."

"Why?"

"I have to go into Russellville and find out."

"As soon as I come back from the town with the news that the money's in the bank we'll set off."

"On our horses?"

"Of course."

"D'ye mean to say that we're to ride into the town in a body?"

"No. We'll split up into three detachments. But we'll meet on the outskirts of the town."

"Where?"

"At the southern end where the road from Tennessee comes in."

"Good! We know all that."

"Then we'll have to ride like mad into the place."

"Follow me," said the bandit king, "and I'll lead you straight to the bank."

All was arranged.

The bandits had resolved on one of the most daring raids that ever they had attempted.

And despite their recent failures, such was their belief in themselves, that this time they never doubted but what they would be successful.

Toward evening Jesse James left the camp.

He hastened into Russellville, not stopping once on the way.

He went to the hotel at which he had stayed during his recent visit to the town.

Then he stabled his horse, remarking to the hostler that he wouldn't need him until to-morrow. "But give him plenty of feed. He's got a lot of work to do then."

"You bet he has," said the bandit king, as he walked into the hotel and registered.

The bandit king had nothing to do until the morning.

He came to the conclusion that he would run less chance of detection if he sought the seclusion of his room.

So he retired promptly.

The next morning he was early astir.

He knew that in some of these small towns the banks opened quite early.

So the bandit king breakfasted.

Then, lighting a cigar, he turned his steps toward the bank.

Almost opposite the bank was a saloon.

This was open. It was more difficult to find one closed.

"The very place!" exclaimed the bandit king.

So he walked over to it and went in.

"I'll take a milk punch," said the bandit.

"Not a bad drink in the morning, either," remarked the bartender.

"You bet it's not."

Jesse James seated himself at a table near the window.

He scrutinized every passerby.

There were very few, so his task was by no means an arduous one.

At length the bandit king gave a start.

For he saw coming down the street toward the bank a man carrying in his hand a small grip.

He went into the bank.

"I'd give something to see what's going on there," said the bandit king to himself.

Impatiently he waited for the stranger to appear.

When he did so he no longer had the grip with him.

This pleased Jesse, for it satisfied him that the man had at least brought nothing away from the bank.

Jesse James now knew all he wished.

If he stayed longer he would know no more.

"Guess I'll be off," he muttered.

He waited until the man who had been to the bank was out of sight, for he thought it best not to meet him—certainly not in the vicinity of the bank.

Then back to the hotel hastened Jesse James.

He mounted his horse and rode slowly until he came to the limits of the town.

Then at full speed he dashed toward the place where his comrades were concealed.

* * * * *

It is about time to return to the detective and the two bandits. It was quite late in the day when they arrived at Benton.

But it was not yet dark.

It seemed as if the detective was endeavoring to get away from the bandits. At least his actions pointed to this.

He hurried through the town.

But the bandits never lost sight of him, although he may have thought they did.

He went into a disreputable looking house that appeared to be a saloon.

"We must separate," said Ed Kelly.

"Why, Ed?"

"Because you bet your life there are two ways of getting out of the place. Now, he mustn't leave without one of us seeing him."

"Very well. You go around to the front. I'll stand here."

"Right."

The two bandits took up their positions, having first of all satisfied themselves that they would not be seen.

For nearly an hour they waited.

Then a man came out.

He did not look in the least like the tramp.

In appearance he seemed to be a farmer.

He had rather a florid, clean shaven face.

But Ed Kelly had no doubt what had happened.

Wood Hite was not aware of the fact that the man had left the saloon, until he became tired of waiting.

Then, going around to where he supposed Ed Kelly was, he found him gone.

At once he knew what had happened.

He felt certain that his comrade would be on the detective's trail.

Ed Kelly shadowed Don Martin in a very skillful manner. He felt convinced that he was not seen.

When Ed Kelly saw him disappear in the doorway of police headquarters he was not surprised.

He had expected that he would go there.

The bandit could hardly refrain from laughing, he was so intensely amused.

For he knew the detective must be warning the authorities and putting them on their guard to prevent a robbery that was never intended to take place.

This was what was happening within.

Don Martin had made himself known, and was closeted with the chief of police.

"This is an extraordinary tale, Mr. Martin."

"But it's true."

"If anybody but you told me I would be disinclined to believe them."

"Ah, but there's no doubt. I came across those two men accidentally in an inn near Glasgow."

"They didn't know you?"

"Had no idea who I was, so I was able to hear a good deal of what was said. There was only one thing left for me to do. I was to keep on their trail and see when they came."

"And you did?"

"Of course. The two men are in the town now."

"Let me have your plan."

"To-morrow the raid on the bank is to take place," said the detective. "Now, we must be ready for them. I think you'd better have your men enter the bank to-night under cover of darkness."

"To do that I must first communicate with the bank authorities."

"Be careful how you manage it. You must not be seen, and I reckon they have their spies about."

"I can do it without exciting any suspicion."

"Another thing I want to say is," continued the detective, "that it would be as well to have a few men posted in some place opposite the bank."

"This shall be done."

"I need scarcely say your men will be armed."

"Naturally, and with rifles."

"Now, take my advice. Directly the bandits appear outside the bank to-morrow morning, tell your men to fire. Shoot them down. It's the only way to destroy the gang."

"If one of them gets away alive, it'll surprise me," said the chief.

"I think that's about all we can do now, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"If you want me I'll be on hand at the hotel."

"Right."

The detective left the office, feeling in his heart that at last he had contrived matters that the bandits must be killed.

He meant to be there himself."

"I wouldn't miss it for anything," he said.

Some little distance away from the hotel he saw two men standing in a dark place.

Evidently the two bandits were making for the hotel.

Glancing round, Don Martin could see them. He was no distance from the hotel, and when he stepped outside their actions were plainly visible.

The bandits remained outside, leaning up against one of the pillars that supported the porch over the entrance.

They were not looking in the detective's direction, so he determined to take advantage of this and get back in their neighborhood.

Then it occurred to him that it would be well to keep out of their sight.

There was a back door to the hotel. He went around to it and entered the building that way.

In the room in front, in which he took up his position, he could see them, and even hear the words that passed between them.

"By this time to-morrow night," said Ed Kelly, "we shall be richer men."

"Or dead," muttered the detective.

"I hope so, Ed," replied Wood Hite.

"Reckon most of the boys'll be there by this time."

"You bet! Come on!"

The two bandits walked away.

Instantly Don Martin determined to shadow the bandits.

Through the streets of the little town the bandits made their way with rapidity.

The detective was at their heels.

The limits of the town were reached.

So far as Don Martin could see there were no more houses.

He stopped.

For he could not hear a sound. The footsteps of the two bandits had died away.

"They're on the soft grass," reasoned Don Martin, "that's why I can't hear them. Well, I'll hurry on."

Instantly he resumed his task.

Then all at once two men sprang from behind a tree.

Heavy hands were laid upon his shoulder.

He felt himself seized in a powerful grasp.

"Don Martin, we have you now!" said a stern voice.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RAID ON THE RUSSELLVILLE BANK.

When we left Jesse James he was riding hard from Russellville to the place where he expected that his comrades had collected.

He had acquired the necessary information.

In a few minutes he was amongst them.

"Well?"

"All right, Frank. Things are going on nicely."

"How bout the money?"

"I saw the cuss who has charge of the bond business enter the bank a few minutes ago with a grip in his hand. He came out without it."

"Which looks as though he had left the cash there."

"Sure."

The bandits mounted their horses.

In three detachments they started for Russellville, going by different routes, but all making for the same point—the road from Tennessee.

Russellville was near the frontier of the state, and very pleasantly located in Logan county.

It was the center of a thriving agricultural district, and its storekeepers did a good business, although it usually seemed to be in a sleepy state.

Russellville was a happy, peaceful town on that morning many years ago.

Suddenly all was changed.

The clatter of hoofs was heard in the street.

Then a band of horsemen appeared.

They were riding like demons, and acting in the same way.

The citizens were appalled.

The horsemen fired their six-shooters rapidly, and uttered fierce cries.

Every man was masked, and this added to the terror that their presence inspired.

Apparently they were at the mercy of these desperadoes.

On rode the bandits.

The cries increased in volume. Still the shots continued to ring out on the air.

What a change from the quiet village of a few minutes ago!

Then suddenly the bandits reined in their steeds.

"Halt!" their leader had shouted.

Instantly the troop did so.

Quick as lightning two men dismounted.

These two men were Jesse James and Cole Younger.

The others remained on their horses.

With a pistol in each hand the bandits rushed toward the building outside of which they had now halted.

It was the Russellville bank.

Furiously the two bandits rushed into the bank.

The cashier and the bookkeeper were there.

They were thunderstruck at the appearance of these two desperadoes armed to the teeth, masked, and looking terribly fierce.

The door of the safe was open when the two bandits entered.

The cashier was in the act of swinging back the door.

Jesse James ran toward him, holding a pistol at the man's head.

"Leave that door alone!" he cried, "or I'll blow your brains out!"

The cashier threw up his hands without a word. So did the bookkeeper. Cole Younger had over-awed him.

Piles of notes lay on the counter in front of the two desperadoes.

There was also a quantity of gold.

Jesse James had a large leather sack with him.

It invariably accompanied him on such expeditions as the present one.

Without losing a moment, whilst Cole Younger kept his eye on the two officials, the bandit king swept the whole of the treasure in front of him into the sack.

"Look sharp after these men, Cole."

"I am. I'll shoot the first that utters a cry or moves an inch!"

"Good!"

The bandit king dashed behind the counter.

He had obtained an immense amount of money.

But it was possible more was to be had.

Up to the cashier Jesse James rushed.

He thrust his six-shooter close to the man's face.

"Listen to me!" said the bandit king.

The cashier made no answer. He was as pale as death.

"I'm going to search this bank. Before I start tell me where there is any more money in this place. Answer as you value your life. For if I find you deceiving me I'll surely kill you."

The fierce look in the bandit's eyes was quite enough to convince his hearer that he meant what he said.

"I know of none," answered the cashier, in a shaky voice.

"Very well! We'll see! Look after him!"

"Right."

The bandit king threw open closets and tore drawers open, but all to no purpose.

He found nothing.

"Reckon he's told the truth, Cole," he said, finding his search was a failure.

"Looks like it."

"Anyway, we've got a pile."

"We'd better go."

"We will."

Putting his hand in the sack, the bandit king found a number of stamps.

He threw them to the cashier.

"You may want them," he said, with a laugh, "to mail your letters. They'll be useful when you write to let people know what's happened here to-day."

The two bandits both laughed at this jest.

Then, without waiting an instant, they both darted out into the street.

"Had any trouble, boys?"

"None, Jesse."

"And you?"

"Oh, we've done fine," answered the bandit king. "I reckon we've got a few thousands here."

As he spoke he held up the sack containing the treasure taken from the bank.

Not a soul was to be seen in the streets.

He mounted his horse. Cole Younger had already done so. Jesse still had possession of the sack containing the plunder. He gave the word to start.

"And there's no need to ride fast," he added.

"Why not?"

"Because, boys, I think it's better not to. Let's keep our eyes about us, ready to repel any attack that's made! If we do that we'll get out of the town easily enough."

"Very well."

The desperadoes went back by the same route by which they had entered the town.

The same programme was adhered to.

Pistols were fired, shouts and threats were uttered.

The citizens were told to keep within their doors on pain of death.

Bang! Bang!

Every now and then the report of a shot was heard.

One of the bandits, as much for the sport as anything else, would fire at a face that appeared at a window.

The desperadoes roared with laughter at the sight of the victim's distress and terror.

At length they reached the outskirts of the town.

Then the bandit king gave the word to proceed with all haste.

Driving their spurs into their horses' sides, the bandits rode away from Russellville without one shot having been fired at them during this memorable raid.

CHAPTER XVI.

DON MARTIN RECEIVES MUCH SURPRISING NEWS.

Don Martin had been taken by surprise.

He knew what had happened.

He had been captured by the bandits.

He cursed himself for his folly in having ventured out into the country.

But it was too late for laments, and it was useless to struggle.

If he attempted resistance these men would undoubtedly kill him.

At the first move he made a bullet would go through his brain.

Even now he could feel the cold steel of the six-shooter against his brow.

No, resistance was useless.

All that Don Martin could do was to remain quite passive and await events.

The bandits had only stopped for a moment.

Now they were hurrying him along, still retaining their firm grip on each of his arms.

Not a word was spoken as through the darkness the trio went.

Then, to the detective's astonishment, he saw in front of him a dwelling.

There was a light in it.

They had not reached the door when it was opened.

The circumstance excited the wonder of the detective.

For it looked as if the party was expected.

There was a man standing in the doorway.

As soon as the light behind him fell on his face and figure Don Martin recognized the man.

It was the same individual that he had seen talking to the two bandits at Benton, where he, hidden in a doorway, was watching their proceedings.

"You've got him, boys," said this man.

"Oh, yes. It's all right this time, Bill," answered Ed Kelly; "he fell into the trap nicely."

"Well, have a good time," laughed the owner of the hut. "I've got business to attend to, and you may not see me again."

"We'll enjoy ourselves without you, Bill," said Wood Hite. "We've got a gentleman with us who'll take your place well."

The three ruffians laughed loudly at this.

Then, without another word, the man addressed as Bill left the house.

Instantly Wood Hite closed the door securely, taking the precaution, in addition to bolting it, to place a stout iron bar across it.

The detective saw that his chances of escape were very few.

He recognized that he had fallen into a trap set for him by the two bandits.

This is what had happened.

The bandits had made up their minds that Don Martin should die.

How to accomplish this did not seem very easy.

True they might have shot him in the streets.

But such a proceeding would be attended with considerable danger to themselves.

Fortune favored them.

They met, quite accidentally, a friend of theirs, Bill Manders.

This was the man whom the detective had seen them talking to at Benton.

When the two bandits found that Bill Manders was living near Benton, an idea occurred to them.

It was to entice Martin out in the neighborhood of the hut, and then they could dispose of him at their leisure.

The plan possessed several advantages.

In the first place, no one but Bill Manders would know how the detective came by his death.

And he could be trusted, as being practically an accessory, not to squeal.

"Well, Mr. Don Martin, how're you enjoying yourself?" asked Ed Kelly, sneeringly.

"I've been in tight corners like this before," said the detective.

"And you've got out?" inquired Ed Kelly.

"Shouldn't be here if I hadn't."

"You'll never get out of our hands alive, Don Martin! We belong to the James Boys," said Ed Kelly, with a ferocious glitter in his eyes, "and when you hear of us sparing a detective you'll know the world is coming to an end."

"I may die," said Don Martin, goaded by these taunts, "but one thing I may tell you."

"Go on."

"You won't rob the bank after all."

Instead of this statement alarming the bandits it had quite another effect.

Both of the men threw themselves back in their chairs and roared with laughter.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" they shouted.

"That's the best thing I've heard for a long time," said Ed Kelly.

"I'll explode, Ed," said Wood Hite.

The detective was astounded.

What did it all mean?

"Mister, you're too green."

"I repeat that you won't rob the bank."

"What bank?"

"The bank at Benton."

"That's true."

Then Don Martin cursed himself for his folly. He felt that he ought not to have said a word about their designs being known.

But the talk that followed showed him that he need have no fear on that score.

"But we're going to have a robbery," put in Wood Hite.

"Oh, you are?" asked the detective, laughingly.

"You bet we are!" cried Wood Hite. "Things'll be a bit lively in Russellville to-morrow, I reckon."

"Russellville!"

Why, what had Russellville to do with the matter?

The bandits saw the surprised look on the detective's face.

Again they laughed.

They were thoroughly enjoying themselves.

"I may as well make a clean breast of it," said Ed Kelly. "You can't do any harm now."

And then he related the whole scheme to the detective.

Don Martin was absolutely overwhelmed.

He saw how completely he had been victimized.

It was utter ruin.

The bandits would have his life and carry out their plan.

"Yes, mister," said Ed Kelly, "to-morrow morning about ten o'clock Jesse'll make things hum in Russellville."

"The gentleman does not want to hear this," remarked Wood Hite, in a tone of mock severity.

"Thought he might."

"Say," suddenly cried Wood Hite.

"Well?"

"A great idea's just come into my head."

"What is it?"

"Let's kill him now, at once."

"Why?"

"So that we can go back to Russellville and join in the fun."

"Can't be done. There's no train. We'll have our fun out of Mr. Martin in the morning."

"You're right. We can't get to Russellville."

The talk ceased.

Ed Kelly was quite right.

The detective had plenty of matter to occupy his thoughts.

He could not conceive how he could have been so entrapped.

He had fallen a victim to a simple trick, such as would scarcely have fooled a detective just starting in life.

Perhaps it was the very simplicity of the trick that had caused it to work so well.

Despairingly, from time to time the detective glanced around the room.

This one roomed hut had a window and a door.

Both of them were barred.

He was reminded of the time when he had got out of a somewhat similar position at Pete Hayes' house on the night when the bandits attempted to stop the train at Deadwood Gap.

But there was a difference in the situation.

Now he had two men to face.

If he managed, by a sudden movement, to overpower one, the other would kill him.

Don Martin came to the conclusion that nothing but a miracle could save him.

The bandits had been smoking cigars and drinking whiskey continuously since their arrival in the hut.

They had even supplied him with the same.

"Say!" cried Wood Hite, abruptly.

"Yes?"

"D'you know what time it is?"

"No."

"It's twelve o'clock."

"That's not late."

"Late! Thunder, I wish it was!"

"What d'you mean?"

"Why, that I don't intend to sit up all night. I did last night. That's enough."

"I'd rather sleep, but how can it be managed."

"Easily."

"Let's hear."

"We've only got to tie this cuss up."

"True. Find some rope then."

"There's a coil over there."

Wood Hite found that it was of sufficient thickness for the purpose.

In a few moments he had bound the detective up securely.

"Take my advice and go to sleep," said Ed Kelly; "enjoy yourself while you can."

In a few moments the bandits were asleep.

They had no fears as to the safety of their prisoner.

They had bound him up so securely that escape was an impossibility.

Don Martin lay on the ground helpless.

His feet were tied together at the ankles.

His arms were fastened down to his sides.

Desperately he tried to bend over so that his mouth might reach the ropes that were around him.

If he could have managed this, his sharp teeth might have done the rest.

But after an hour of incessant and exhaustive labor, the detective was forced to confess to himself that his efforts were in vain.

At last he had to admit that he was beaten.

Not a sound was heard in the hut now but the ticking of the clock.

And each beat of the pendulum reminded him that he was nearing the horrible fate which awaited him in the morning.

CHAPTER XVII.

DON MARTIN'S PERIL.

Before following the course of the bandits after they left Russellville, it is well to see what happened to Don Martin.

Morning came, and it found the detective in the same position.

That is to say, he was lying bound and helpless on the floor of the hut.

The two bandits awoke.

They both cast a satisfied look at their prisoner.

"Now, for the fun," said Ed Kelly, brutally.

"How shall we finish him off?" asked Wood Hite.

"I'll tell you presently."

Ed Kelly left the hut.

When he arrived the night before it was quite dark. So he had no idea what the country surrounding the hut was like.

But it was his intention to see.

He found that the hut was placed on an eminence.

Walking some little distance in the direction whence he heard the sound of rushing water, Ed Kelly discovered that a stream ran rapidly along some forty feet beneath him.

"We might drown him," he observed, philosophically.

But somehow the notion did not fall in altogether with his idea of what ought to be done with the detective.

The bandit stood on a bluff which projected far out into the stream.

Over his head was a huge tree.

One of the branches of this tree was quite low down.

It reached almost across the stream.

"By gosh! I've got it!"

A brilliant idea struck him as he uttered this exclamation.

Hurriedly he went back to the hut.

"I know what to do, Wood."

"Let's hear."

"Oh, no need of that. You'll like it."

"Very well. If I don't I'll soon let you know, and we can try something else."

"Bet you my share of the Russellville bank money that you'll agree with me."

"That's a large order, Ed."

"It shows my confidence."

"We'd better bring him along."

"Yes."

Wood Hite was about to cut the rope when Ed Kelly interfered.

"Don't do that."

"Why not?"

"We may want it."

"If we do there's plenty more here."

Wood Hite pointed to a heap of rope in the corner of the hut.

"Too much trouble to untie these knots," muttered the bandit, as he severed the cords which bound the detective.

"Now bring him along."

Don Martin was told to stand up.

But this he found impossible.

He was so cramped through having lain so long in one position that it was several minutes before he was able to get on his legs.

As he walked along the bandits uttered taunts and jeered him continually.

They were trying to break down the stern composure and utter fearlessness which the detective had manifested since his capture.

But they failed in the task.

Don Martin resolved that whatever might be his fate he would meet it like a man.

"These wretches would like to see me cringe before them and beg for my life," he muttered, "but, by heaven, there I'll disappoint them!"

By this time the three men had arrived at the bluff.

"Are they going to drown me?" was the question that submitted itself to the detective when he saw his surroundings.

Ed Kelly took Wood Hite a little way apart.

Then, in a whisper, Ed Kelly confided to Wood his scheme for destroying the life of the detective.

From the look on Wood Hite's face, it could be seen that it met with his approval.

"We can do it easily, Ed."

"Sure!"

There was a touch of ingenuity about Ed Kelly's scheme.

First of all, a rope was firmly tied around an overhanging branch.

The other end of it was made fast to Don Martin by being passed under his armpits.

Now the detective had some faint idea of what was about to be done.

He imagined that the bandits intended to hang him over the stream and shoot at him.

But he was still away from the truth.

Next another rope was tied around one of the detective's legs.

The bandits tested both ropes, and found that there was no possibility of their becoming unfastened.

All was now arranged.

"Guess you see it's all over with you now, mister," said Ed Kelly.

"Any last request to make?" asked Wood Hite, with a sneer.

"No," said Ed Kelly. "Very well. Let the fun begin."

Don Martin maintained an obstinate silence.

He knew death was at hand.

But to the last he maintained his fearless bearing.

Then suddenly, almost without notice, he was pushed off the edge of the bluff upon which he had been standing.

Through the air he swept.

With a loud splash he fell into the water.

The bandits roared with laughter.

The rope which held him to the branch of the tree was a long one.

Consequently the rushing water bore him along for a considerable distance.

Up to now, though he had sustained a severe wetting, he had suffered no serious injury.

Then the use to which the rope around his leg was to be put, was seen.

Wood Hite had a firm grasp on this.

Now he commenced pulling at it violently.

He dragged Don Martin through the torrent.

Then, by putting forth a great effort, he lifted Don Martin right out of the water.

For an instant Don Martin was poised in the air.

Then with a crash he again descended into the water and out of sight, sprang to the surface, and was once more borne violently along by the flood.

Now, what is fun to some is death to others.

Here was an instance of it.

The strain on his body when Wood Hite was dragging him from the water was terrific.

This he endeavored to relieve by holding on to the rope with his hands.

The bandits, knowing him to be helpless, had left his arms free.

The detective had been lifted from the water a fourth time.

Once more he fell into it.

But this time he entered the water in quite a different manner.

Instead of descending as an inert mass, he went out into the water hands first, in the manner of a diver taking a plunge.

Through the water, out of sight, he went at a great rate, borne along by the flood, and the impetus his action had given him.

He came to the surface near the opposite bank of the narrow stream.

The rope had not yet run out to its full tether.

Quick as lightning Don Martin sprang forward.

He made a desperate effort.

Then the amazed bandits saw him glide behind a rock.

He disappeared from sight.

But they put no serious interpretation on this act.

It merely prolonged the detective's life by a few minutes, and added variety to the proceedings.

"Pull him off, Wood."

"Right."

Wood Hite tugged at the rope.

But the detective did not appear.

Then, exerting all his strength, he tried to drag Don Martin into sight.

But he was obdurate, and refused to come.

"By heaven, Ed," cried Wood Hite, "this is a harder matter than I thought. You'd better give me a hand."

"Very well."

Both the bandits now held the rope, and they both pulled for all they were worth.

The same result followed.

The detective remained out of sight.

Now the two bandits were furious.

They began to see that to dislodge him from his retreat was almost an impossibility.

"What's to be done?" asked Ed Kelly, furiously.

"We must get over to the other side and shoot him," answered Wood Hite, savagely. "He must not escape."

"Escape! that's bosh!" said Ed Kelly; "such an idea as that never entered my head. We'll have fun with him yet."

Up the stream they went with the utmost speed.

Almost two hundred yards away they found a place that was fordable.

Without a moment's loss of time they crossed.

Then down toward the spot under which the detective was hiding ran the two bandits.

"There was a savage look on each of their faces, as with pistols in their hands they neared the enemy.

"Don't shoot to kill, Ed," said Wood Hite.

"Not likely! We'll have a little target practice."

They came to the bluff which was exactly opposite the one on which they had been standing a few minutes before.

Looking down, the two bandits saw the detective beneath them.

Hearing the sounds above, he had glanced up, and his upturned face met theirs.

"I'm going to shoot!" said Ed Kelly.

"Very well."

The bandit took careless aim and fired.

Bang!

Apparently the bullet did not hit the detective, for no cry of pain came from him.

But a most extraordinary thing happened.

The two bandits saw Don Martin disappear beneath the surface of the water, apparently with the intention of avoiding any bullets that might come at him.

When he reappeared he was fifty yards down the stream, traveling rapidly.

The rope that had held him was floating on the top of the water.

Instantly they saw what had happened.

He had severed the rope by rubbing it on the sharp and jagged edge of the rock against which he had sheltered.

"He must not escape!" cried Ed Kelly.

"Kill him—kill him!" shouted Wood Hite.

Bang! Bang!

The bandits fired as they ran.

Then a party of men appeared. They had been attracted by the shooting.

Mad with rage, the two bandits dashed into the woods.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FRANK JAMES AT FAULT.

The bandits had got away from Russellville unmolested.

The inhabitants of the town had been paralyzed with astonishment.

The bold, determined action of the bandits had completely cowed them. But only for a time.

Now the enemy had fled, and the courage and wits of the citizens returned.

Instantly they assembled ready to start in hot pursuit.

Every man who could go, appeared ready equipped with rifle or pistol and a horse, prepared to take part in the chase.

No effort was to be spared to bring the perpetrators of this audacious outrage to justice. And the men who left Russellville were resolved that they would not return without having done something to revenge themselves on the disturbers of their peace, the robbers of their wealth.

Accordingly a troop of horsemen left Russellville very soon after the bandits had disappeared.

They were all well mounted, and could not have numbered less than forty men.

So it was apparent that the bandits would have a bad time of it, if these men came near them.

And these were not the only people who were in pursuit.

The news of the robbery at the bank had been sent everywhere.

Along the electric wire the message had been flashed.

The country was alive with mounted men, searching for the bandits.

The credit of the outrage was given to the James Boys, although no one had seen the faces of any of the band.

But it was thought that no one but they would have had the courage to execute such a deed.

Hour after hour the men from Russellville rode.

As they went along they made careful inquiry from time to time, and the answers they received satisfied them that they were keeping on the trail of the bandits.

"We can't be far behind," said one man.

"That's so. I'll bet my life we're riding as fast as they are, and our horses will hold out just as long."

"If we don't see them before night," said another man, "I am afraid they will give us the slip."

"Not they. We will stick to them until we find them."

The spirit of the last speaker was what animated all the pursuers.

They were determined to capture the bandits, so that Kentucky might be rid forever of these bands of desperadoes.

In front of the bandits was the Cumberland river.

This had to be crossed.

Perhaps, to speak correctly, it would be better to say that unless the bandits did cross it their danger would increase.

For they would then be compelled to retrace their steps.

It was night when in front of them the bandits heard the waters of the river.

The night was very dark, a circumstance which favored the bandits.

"By heaven," said Jesse, "we're hard pressed this time, and no mistake."

These words were spoken during a short halt which the party was taking.

"They're close behind."

"We must cross the river to-night," put in Bob Ford.

"It's absolutely necessary," cried Cole Younger.

"Say, Jesse!"

"Well?"

"Do you think it would be better for us to separate?"

"Not yet, Jim."

"Why?"

"Because I reckon we may have to fight for our lives. We'd better stick together for the present."

"What d'you think, Frank?"

"I agree with you, Jesse. Let's remain in a body till we get out of this state."

"Very well."

Again the bandits resumed their ride.

Now they came to the bank of the river.

In front of them flowed the Cumberland.

It had to be crossed.

Up and down the stream the men rode hurriedly, seeking for some shallow spot by which they might get over to the other side.

But they found none.

"We've no time to waste, boys."

"What's to be done, then?"

"We must swim our horses over if we find it's too deep."

"By heaven! That's not pleasant."

"Better than having a bullet in you, Clell."

"Rather."

"Take care of your ammunition, boys. Don't let that get wet," said the bandit king. "We don't know when we may want it."

Into the dark waters plunged the bandits.

Their horses battled bravely with the stream.

They reached the other side in safety.

There for a few moments they stopped to rest.

"Listen!"

Jesse James commanded silence.

"What is it?"

"Can't you understand, Bob? The fellows after us are crossing the river. They've just entered the stream. Mount, boys! We must be off again."

There was nothing else to do.

It was a day of tireless activity.

The bandits had entered the wild, rocky region that leads to the borderland of Tennessee.

They were riding now through a succession of defiles and gulches.

Not a soul was to be seen.

At night they had nothing to fear.

"Halt!" cried the bandit king.

"What is it?"

"We must stop."

"Is it safe?"

"It's not a question of whether it is safe or not," cried Jesse James; "it's absolutely necessary. The horses will drop if we don't give them some rest. Then where'll we be?"

"In the soup!" laughed Al Shepard.

"Yes, very much."

"What do you propose to do, Jesse?"

"It's now about eleven o'clock."

"Well?"

"My plan is to rest for three hours."

"Yes."

"Then to press forward with all speed during the remainder of the time before day breaks."

"After that?"

"Why, we'll find some retreat. There I hope to stay all day. To-morrow night we'll cover not less than fifty miles, I hope."

"I reckon your plan's the best one we can adopt."

"I don't see any other, Bob. The horses must have a rest."

"That's so."

"And this place is as good to hide in as any other we shall find."

Nothing more was said. The bandits had all dismounted.

They had prepared for the journey by bringing with them some food for the horses.

This they now gave them.

The animals were grateful for the rest they were obtaining.

Some of the bandits threw themselves on the grass, but not all.

It was necessary to be exceedingly cautious.

Consequently four of the bandits were posted at some considerable distance from the main body to act as sentries.

Their duty was to keep a sharp lookout and give instant notice of the enemy's approach.

The four men selected for this duty were Frank James, Bob Ford, Jim Cummins and Clell Miller.

Quite two hours had passed.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the enemy.

It was hoped that in these rocky defiles the trail had been lost.

Frank James was sitting behind a rock keeping a good lookout.

Suddenly a noise startled him.

He felt certain he heard footstep.

Instantly his vigilance was redoubled.

He waited in great expectation with his six-shooter in his hand.

Not long was he left in doubt as to the meaning of the sounds that he heard.

He could see, dark though it was, that some object was moving toward him.

Now it was clear to Frank James that this man was no inhabitant of the neighborhood engaged in his own pursuits.

The bandit realized instantly what it meant.

The main body of the pursuers was near at hand.

They had tracked the bandits to somewhere near the spot. Then as the trail had been lost, they had sent scouts out with the hope that it might be found.

This solitary individual was searching for the trail.

The man was coming slowly and cautiously toward the bandit.

Frank James clenched his teeth.

There was a fierce glitter in his eye, and his hand tightened on his six-shooter.

"He'll hand in his checks," said the bandit to himself, with a bitter smile on his face.

Not many yards away was the enemy now.

Frank James was getting ready to shoot.

Then all at once the foolishness of the act dawned upon him.

"Great Scott!" he cried. "I must be crazy. Why, the shot would bring the whole crowd after us without an instant's delay. That won't do."

But it did not take him long to decide how he should act.

He passed his six-shooter into his left hand.

Then, with his right he grasped his bowie knife with its keen blade.

"He'll die without a sound," muttered Frank James.

He had quite decided to kill the man.

His first idea had been to let him pass.

If he did the stranger would stray into the very midst of the bandits.

For him escape would be impossible.

But against this was to be said, that in all probability the stranger might defend himself for a minute or two, during which time he would be able to discharge his six-shooter more than once.

The noise would summon all his comrades to the spot.

"The knife's the best plan," said Frank James. "I'll make short work of this cuss and do it quickly, too. That's what I want."

On came the man.

He was almost level with Frank James, and was not more than three or four yards away.

The bandit was crouching behind a rock.

Now, knife in hand, he sprang up.

The keen blade glittered in the air as it swept through it.

But it did not do its work well.

As Frank James sprang forward his foot had caught in some obstruction.

This caused him to stumble and almost fall.

His stroke was diverted.

Instead of killing his foe, the bowie knife merely grazed the man's shoulder, inflicting a trivial flesh wound.

Bang!

Bang!

Quick as lightning the stranger fired.

He had held his six-shooter in his hand as he had advanced in order to be ready for any emergency.

Frank James fired, too. He had to act in self-defense now.

Rapidly the stranger retreated, apparently unhurt by the shot the bandit had fired.

Bang! Bang!

Bang! Bang!

He fired at his assailant as he retreated, and Frank James returned the fire.

Loudly the stranger began to shout.

Frank James knew it was no time for delay.

He rushed back to his comrades.

"In the saddle, boys! We must ride for our lives!" he cried. Once more the pursuit was on.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

What had happened was a rude surprise to the bandits.

For they had hoped that they had thrown off their pursuers. Jesse James knew how important it was that they should do so before morning.

In a little over an hour daylight would appear.

Then the dangers of the bandits would be very greatly increased.

When it was light the bandits would not dare to leave the rocky region in which they now were.

And if they stayed their whereabouts would be located, and the multitude of pursuers who were now on their trail would enclose them in a net from which there would be no escape.

The bandits were eagerly looking for some place of shelter.

At length they came to a wood.

It appeared to be very dense.

Anyway, without much discussion, it was decided by the desperadoes that they should hide in it, in the hope that their pursuers might pass on.

Into its thickest recesses they plunged.

It was now daylight.

Through the trees the rays of light came.

The bandits kept a guard at all points, ready to start again at a moment's notice.

They had not opened the sack which contained the plunder since they left Russellville.

And so afraid were they of a surprise at any moment, that they feared even now to take out the spoil and count it, much as they wished to know the amount.

"Great Scott! I hope they'll pass on," said Bob Ford.

"They must have done so. If they hadn't," said Cole Younger, "we'd have seen them by now."

"That doesn't follow," remarked the bandit king.

"Why not?"

"Because they may have determined not to come in this wood even if they located us here. It's likely enough that they have decided to surround us."

"Gosh! You're a Job's comforter, Jesse!"

"Oh, I don't say it's certain," said the bandit king, "only I like to look at the worst side of things."

"If it hadn't been for Frank we shouldn't have had any of this bother," observed Clell Miller.

"How in thunder could I help it?" asked Frank James, hotly. "D'you think I failed to kill the man on purpose. Not much!"

"Shut up!" shouted the bandit king. "We've got enough to do just now in fighting for our lives! We don't want to fight each other."

The bandits all realized the serious position in which they found themselves.

Since they had left Russellville the pursuit had been incessant.

All that day the bandits remained in the woods.

They had not heard a sound to disturb them.

In this some of the bandits found great consolation.

"It shows that our trail has been lost," said Al Shepard.

"It doesn't show anything of the kind, boys," replied the bandit king. "The men who were pursuing us could not have been a mile behind when we turned into this wood; so they must be darned sure we're not far off."

"By heaven! that's so," added Frank James, "and as soon as we're out of these woods you'll see if Jesse isn't right."

It was now night again.

During the darkness the bandits were able to travel.

So they lost no time in starting.

When they got out of the wood they found, unfortunately for them, that the moon was shining brightly.

This added another element of danger.

And they also found that Jesse James was right in his anticipation.

Before they had got two miles, they became aware of the fact that they were being followed.

Again they had to ride their best to save their lives.

Their horses were fresh, for they had rested the whole of the day.

But the steeds of their pursuers had the same advantage, so the contest was equal.

But there was one advantage that the pursuers had.

It was that they were better acquainted with the neighborhood through which they were riding than the bandits.

The desperadoes had very soon good reason to ascertain this fact.

Still, both parties were in the same rocky region.

Many times, in order to make any progress, the bandits found it necessary to ride along in single file, so narrow was the path.

And it was rough and rugged, as well as narrow.

Some distance behind were the pursuers.

Who they were the bandits did not know. They might be the men from Russellville, and they might not.

This was quite immaterial, for whoever the enemy was he was equally to be dreaded and avoided.

Now, in the light of the moon, the bandits were actually able to see the large party of horsemen, who were riding in pursuit. Although they were quite a mile away.

Not another mile had been traversed when, to the wonder of the bandits, the same pursuers appeared again.

But this time they were not half a mile away.

The bandits were appalled.

Matters looked serious.

Of course they knew that the enemy had not gained half a mile on them in the distance of a mile.

This was absurd.

But it showed that they had taken advantage of a short cut.

"By gosh!" cried the bandit king. "Things look black now, boys, if you like."

"Thunder!" exclaimed Frank James: "I shan't worry when we're out of this cursed, rocky country. It looks as if it would be the death of us."

"Those men'll overtake us," said Cole Younger.

"Overtake us!" shouted Clell Miller. "Why, we shall suddenly find them in front of us if we are not careful."

Clell Miller had only spoken the truth.

It was absolutely certain that the bandits were now in greater danger than they had been at any time since the chase commenced.

Yet, what was to be done?

Not one of the bandits was able to think of anything feasible.

The pathway had now narrowed down again.

Once more the bandits were riding in single file.

Jim Cummins was leading.

All at once he halted.

His doing so blocked the way and compelled his companions to do the same.

Angrily some of them demanded an explanation of his proceedings.

"Horse gone wrong, Jim?" asked the bandit king.

"No; I'm allright. So's the horse."

"What is it?"

"I've thought of an idea," cried Jim Cummins. "It will gain time for us."

"Quick! Out with it!" exclaimed the bandit king. "Every moment counts now."

"I know. Listen."

"Hurry up!"

"See those rocks?"

"Yes."

"Why not," said Jim Cummins, speaking very hastily, "throw some down and block the way?"

"By heaven! it shall be done," cried the bandit king. "Off your horses, boys, instantly! There's not a moment to lose. This scheme of Jim's may save us."

The bandits hurriedly led their horses past the point which was to be blocked.

Then, quick as lightning they sprang up the sides of the rocks and began to dislodge them.

To do so was a work of no great difficulty, and it did not take long.

Huge rocks were toppled over, completely filling up the narrow way.

The bandits were delighted.

It was absolutely impossible now for any horseman to pass, and it would take at least half an hour to clear the path.

This would give the bandits a good start.

"They'll find another way, Jesse."

"Let 'em," said Jim Cummins. "Anyway, it'll give us a start."

The pursuers were now close at hand.

But still the bandits did not move.

Instead of doing so, they hid themselves behind the rocks, and there, pistol in hand, waited for the coming of the foe.

Naturally the men in pursuit saw what had happened.

They noticed the way was blocked, and they did not attribute this circumstance to an accident.

Before they could decide what to do the bandits fired.

Bang! Bang!

Three of the pursuers were severely wounded. This is all the mischief that was done.

Then, protected by the rocks from the bullets of the enemy, the bandits sought their horses, leapt to the saddle, and again started at a furious pace along the narrow defile.

Jim Cummins' stratagem had saved the party.

They obtained a long lead.

It was decided now to separate.

Then the band dispersed.

Most of them were making their way along the borders of Tennessee towards the Mississippi.

Jesse James was riding along alone.

Hour after hour he had kept on his way.

The bandit king had taken a somewhat different direction from the rest of the band.

He was apparently making for Arkansas, from which state he would find no difficulty in crossing into Texas.

It was toward evening.

Only once had the bandit king stopped.

This was in order that he might obtain some food.

Once or twice in the distance behind him the bandit had noticed a solitary horseman.

But he did not attach much importance to this.

He was no doubt a farmer of the district.

It was in the highest degree unlikely that he was trailing the bandit king, for one man would not have the hardihood to do so.

Jesse James lost sight of the man.

He dismissed the subject from his mind.

The further he rode the more his spirits rose.

Soon it would be dark again.

By morning the bandit king estimated that all danger of further pursuit would be over.

He was now riding along some rather high ground.

Already the bridge was in view.

The bandit king was now not more than twenty yards away from it.

Suddenly at the other end of the narrow bridge a man appeared.

Jesse James was thunderstruck.

Quick as lightning he reined in his steed. For he knew who the man was that barred his passage.

He was Don Martin!

Like a statue the detective sat on his horse at the end of the bridge.

"Jesse James!" he cried, in ringing tones, "one of us must die! There's no room for both of us in this world!"

The bandit king made no reply.

Already he had determined how to act.

He drove his spurs into his horse's sides. The animal bounded forward. In a few strides the edge of the bluff was reached.

One instant only, the horse halted. Then, pressed by its rider, it sprang boldly out.

Swiftly descending through the air, in a moment horse and

rider found themselves in the river.

The bandit king had fallen at least thirty feet.

Bang!

The astonished detective had fired once, but his shot was wide of the mark.

Then in a moment the bandit king and his steed were swept out of sight by the swift current.

Don Martin saw them no more.

The bandits made good their escape despite all the efforts of their pursuers.

Don Martin was untiring in his exertions. Directly he had escaped from Ed Kelly and Wood Hite he traveled back to where it was likely he would meet with the flying bandits.

What success he had we have seen.

When the bandits came to divide the spoils they found that they had obtained sufficient to compensate them for their previous failures.

They shared amongst them little less than one hundred thousand dollars.

THE END.

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